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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways for students to learn the importance of history. It provides teachers with ideas and thoughts about different approaches to teaching history. The study examined how students viewed historical time, made historical judgments, and what students saw as historically important. An ethnically diverse, urban class of 22 eighth graders studied the exploration and British Colonization of North America for 7 weeks. Six students were interviewed before and after the study unit to assess prior and subsequent knowledge of U.S. colonial history. After the unit ended, most of the students consistently had difficulties reconstructing what they learned in the unit. Results are discussed in terms of 3 points: (1) the importance of prior knowledge and historical sense-making; (2) the need for more powerful themes on which to build an understanding of the period than chronological structure alone; and (3) the potential to increase students' meaning-making experiences by offering them significant reasons for learning history and connecting historical study to their personal lives. Concluding the paper is a 27-item bibliography, a 2-page appendix of pre- and post-unit protocol questions, and a table of unit objectives. (JAG)

"I Don't Remember—the Ideas Are All Jumbled in My Head": Eighth Graders' Reconstructions of Colonial American History

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"I Don't Remember—the Ideas Are All Jumbled in My Head":
Eighth Graders' Reconstructions of Colonial American History

Following a lengthy unit on British colonization, the interviewer asks an eighth-grade student, "Tell me about the Jamestown colony." The student, Randy, replies,

> Jamestown, I think it was like the colony that. . .I remember it was the colony. . .I don't really remember much. I just think, um. . .I don't really remember much about the Jamestown colony.
> Interviewer: Where was Jamestown located?
> R: In Virginia I think.
> I: How was Jamestown organized and governed?
> R: Well, the governor was like the leader, but actually the king hired him but like he gave him, he gave the governor the right to go over to Virginia and sit on that land. He gave him a charter, and he was like the president, I guess you could say the king over there for the people. Like he helped them do stuff, like he helped them with farming or something like that. He taught like the Indians, or somebody taught the. . .it's like all jumbled up in my head. I don't remember exactly.
> I: Why do you think that is?
> R: 'Cause it was so much stuff that I learned and I would learn more stuff and . . . I know it's there, but there's just so much stuff.

Randy's study of American history is a staple of his K-12 curriculum experience. He explored it in fifth grade, is now studying it in middle school, and will again in high school. This pattern of recurrent study is common across the U.S. (Naylor & Diem, 1987). Despite being a curriculum centerpiece, those who have reviewed the literature (Armento, 1986; Brophy, 1990; Downey & Levstik, 1991; Marker & Mehlinger, 1992) note that too few studies have examined students' conceptions or understandings of the subject. They argue that additional research would help those interested make greater sense of students' developing knowledge of the discipline of history and the historical record it produces.

Emerging research done in the U.S. has examined areas such as how students develop views of historical time; how students make historical judgments; what they

see as historically important; their view of textbooks; how they develop historical schemata, context, and empathy with characters of the past; and how students read history (e.g., Barton, 1993; Brophy, VanSledright, & Bredin, 1992, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Levstik, 1986, 1989; Levstik & Pappas, 1987; McKeown & Beck, 1990; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992; Wineburg, 1991). The importance of these areas of research are related primarily to their potential for informing curriculum developers, policymakers, and practitioners and for their applicability to a growing body of scholarship on what it means to learn history.

Because paper-pencil tests tend to dominate assessment activities, most practitioners lack the time necessary to speak individually and at length to their students to develop a rich sense of how they think and make sense of what they are learning. Therefore, they can benefit by reading detailed accounts of student thinking drawn from in-depth interviews. Curriculum developers may gain qualitative insights into the learning outcomes of particular history scope and sequence plans and methods of teaching. And this research can also serve policymakers, particularly those on the current History Standards Projects for example, for what it may reveal of students' perceptions about what they learn, wish to learn, and have diffuiculty learning.

An area of learning history that has been particularly absent from the research literature is the middle school level. So what meaning do students make of the history they learn at that level, say for example Randy's experience with British colonization along the Atlantic seaboard? How does this history relate (or not) to what he studied in fifth grade? How might it prepare him (or not) for the study of American history in high school? If his response reflects at all a typical middle-grade students' sense-making experience, there is cause to be concerned about how these questions might be addressed. This paper presents findings from a naturalistic case study of a class of

urban, ethnically diverse eighth graders, who, over the course of 7 weeks, studied in some depth and detail the exploration and British colonization of North America.[1]

Method

Context of the Study

The teacher, Ms. Kerwin,[2] was an 18-year veteran. She earned both B.A. and M.A. degrees from Catholic undergraduate and graduate institutions. Her undergraduate major was elementary education and her graduate degree was in geography. She had nurtured her geography interest by infusing the study of eighth-grade history with geographical content. She frequently employed mapping exercises and was fond of exploring the relationship between the nature of the land and human adaptations to it.

The school district had developed a comprehensive curriculum guide complete with concise objectives. Kerwin said that she worked diligently in following the objectives, largely because she had been one of a number of middle-grade social studies teachers responsible for helping to craft them. Table 1 provides a list of major objectives for the colonial unit.

[insert Table 1. about here]

The students in the observed third-period class represented a wide array of ethnic backgrounds. Of the 22 students, 11 were African Americans, 4 were Asian Americans (an Indian, a Pakistani, and two Vietnamese), 4 were European Americans, and 3 were Hispanic. There were 16 females and 6 males. Their "World Studies" course was classified as "regular" track.[3] The students in this class were considered "academically average." The 6 interviewees were chosen by their record of generally

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[1] This study is a part of a larger exploration of what students learn in their history classes and what meaning it has for them. The studies began in fifth grade (VanSledright, 1992, 1993) and currently have been extended through the eighth grade into high school. These studies also include careful examinations of the contexts and ways the teachers represent the historical material to students.

[2] All identifying names have been recast as pseudonyms.

[3] There was a "Gifted and Talented" track and an "Academic Skills" track at this middle school.

midrange achievement in middle school and in this class (grades of Bs and Cs) and by the aggreement of their parents to let them participate. The middle school itself—850 students located in an large urban environment along the east coast—mirrored the ethnic diversity of the class.

Procedures

Through daily observations, data were collected on teaching practices, the curriculum materials used, student assignments, and so forth. Six students from this class were interviewed in depth before the unit began and again after its completion to explore in detail how their historical knowledge and understanding of colonization was influenced by their study. The audiotaped interviews followed a semistructured protocol[4] that began by inviting students to recreate whatever they knew about British colonization broadly defined. After this, students were asked a series of specific questions about early exploration, subsequent settlements, encounters with Native Americans, colonial growth and government, and what they knew of the American Revolution. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, then edited for clarity. For example, repetitious words were omitted and if further questioning produced nothing new or only I-don't-know responses, this part of the exchange was also omitted.

In order to learn more about the larger groups' prior knowledge and experience with unit content, a two-part questionnaire was completed by all 22 students in the class. The first part—completed before the unit—asked students to describe everything they could remember about the period. After the unit, students completed the second part, in which they were asked to write a narrative about what they had learned from studying the colonization process (see Ogle, 1986).

[4] Initially, standardized questions were asked and then they were followed by a series of probes that explored the depth of the students' knowledge and sense making. Probing questions were generated in response to students' comments. See the appendix for a list of the standardized questions.

After providing an overview of students' prior knowledge going into the unit and a brief explanation of how the teacher represented the historical period to the class, I focus on the interview responses. They demonstrate most clearly how, despite exposure to a rich array of details and events in their study of colonization, students experienced difficulty in making sense of the events of the period. I conclude with several implications that derive from the findings.

For the purposes of this study, data analyses and interpretation were framed out in two ways. First, students' interview reconstructions were assumed to constitute their knowledge, sense, and understanding about the events and developments asked for in the question. The responses were considered holistically as though they represented the full narrative reconstructive capacity (a form of oral history) then at the students' disposal. One therefore could "read" the oral histories (Geertz, 1973; Ricoeur, 1971) to assess how knowledge use, comprehension, and subtlety and nuance of thought interacted to produce (or not) understanding.[5]

Second, the responses needed to be contextualized in order for them to be read; that is, they had to be situated within this school district and social studies class. This involved examining them: (a) in light of the school district goals and objectives identified for this eighth-grade class, which in general appeared consonant with developing in students an understanding of consensus historians' views on what "actually happened back then" (the "textbook account"), (b) relative to the time expended on the unit (as a choice about resource commitments and expected results),

[5] In the analysis, it appears as if I use the terms historical knowledge and historical understanding interchangeably. One could make the case that they are different entities; the former is contained in libraries (in fact, date, interpretative, explanatory form) and the latter resides in the human mind (Novick, 1988, p. 582). While this makes some sense, I believe historical knowledge is the sine qua non of sense making and understanding. Therefore, in the context of these students' historical understanding, I assume it to depend upon the possession of historical knowledge. It is how they use this knowledge in reconstructing their accounts in this context that displays (or not) their understanding. Thus the appearance of interchangeability. I however do think that one could have knowledge without understanding and this is the case with many of these students. I try to make the latter obvious where I think the case warrants.

and (c) against the backdrop of how Kerwin understood the objectives and thus represented the historical material to students. Using this context and its attendant criteria, a student's postunit reconstruction, for example, was judged to demonstrate coherence and understanding if it (a) reflected congruence with specified curriculum unit goals, (b) was connected to what was studied in class or in homework (or to related prior knowledge), and (c) was internally consistent, that is, it followed a form of story grammar. Assessing and making descriptive and/or normative statements about the students' historical reconstructions was contained within and constrained by these background in situ factors (on a similar method of making assessments, see Moss, 1994, p.7).

Findings

Students' Prior Knowledge

In general, both preunit interview and questionnaire results suggested that students' prior knowledge concerning colonization was vague at best. Nine of 22 students responding to the preunit questionnaire said that either they could not remember anything about British colonies or had forgotten what they once knew. Interview responses varied from student to student; some students remembered a number of things from fifth grade and also earlier grades, most notably, in the latter case, the oft-taught first Thanksgiving story. What students were able to reconstruct from memory, however, appeared quite disconnected and often decontextualized—exercises in knowledge recall without understanding.

In this sense, interview reconstructions were reminiscent of those we found in our research on fifth graders' prior historical conceptions (Brophy, et al., 1992, 1993; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). However, they were different in some ways as well. For example, some fifth graders, having not studied much sustained history, produced fancifully elaborated narrative accounts, which in some cases bore little resemblance to what historians have written about the past. Whereas, the eighth graders tended to be a

bit more knowledgeable and were more analytical (or paradigmatic as Bruner [1985] would say) and circumspect in their responses. These difference may be worth extended research attention in themselves.

Here are typical responses from these eighth graders. Sento (Hispanic) and Randy (African-American) were the male students; Justine , Jarona (both African-American), Patty (European-American), and Amber (Asian-American) were the female students.

Preunit Question #1. The last time you studied about exploration and colonization of North America by the Europeans was probably in fifth grade. Tell me what you remember about those colonies and explorers.

Justine: I guess I can't remember back that far.
Interviewer: Can you tell me anything that you do remember?
J: That I learned in the fifth grade? We learned about Christopher Columbus and um. . .(pause).
I: Any of this about explorers and colonies that you remember from fifth grade?
J: No, I can't. All this stuff that we're learning is like new. It's like I kind of know it but. . .like I know some of it but not all of it like Cartier and exploring North America and stuff like that.

Randy: Not really anything much. I remember certain things, I remember the Boston Tea Party and little things like that but not really anything like summing up or anything.
I: You don't remember the overall story or?
R: Not really, I just know like. . .kind of like (inaudible) England and France and Spain wanted to like control everything. They were always fighting and stuff like that. I remember how like um. . .Queen Elizabeth, she took her ship and she rammed them into Spain's big ships and made them go on fire and stuff like that. That's about it.

These two responses reflect both stylistic and substantive commonalties that began with this first question and extended through the preunit interview with 5 of the 6 interviewees. The exception was Patty whose responses I say more about momentarily. Students had difficulty (re)constructing a coherent account of exploration and colonization of North America. They evinced significant effort in trying to piece together a recognizable picture. But generally they were unsuccessful, generating no more than a handful of details and names, often elicited only after several probing

questions. Randy's recollection of a Spanish-English sea battle most likely stems from the class's earlier, eighth-grade consideration of several wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not from fifth grade or before.

Preunit Question #9. The explorers often sailed back to Europe and reported what they had found in the "New" World. What happened next?

Sento: Oh, like the queen and the king would like say that they want the land or something.
I: Then what would happen?
S: Mmm. . .then I guess they would like go back and claim it.
I: And once they claimed the land then what would happen?
S: I don't remember.

Justine: They would go back to get. . .to find more things and they had. . .I think they told them that the Indians, the Native Americans, were like savage people who didn't like. . .they weren't good people and they were like bad and then they came back to try to find things.

Jarona: I have no idea. I don't know if they. . .I guess they could. . .they would probably send another fleet of people back so they would stay and I guess explore the land itself and see what type of land it was. If they wanted it, they would. . .I guess set up a colony or not a colony but I guess like a quarter. They would set up something. I guess. . .if they really wanted it, I guess they would set up some type of inhabitance. . .that's not the right word. . .some kind of settlement.

Jarona, a recent émigré from a middle school in St. Louis, had spent a portion of eighth grade studying about explorers and colonization. She possessed a slightly more cohesive picture of this period than the other students (again with the possible exception of Patty). Nevertheless, her knowledge of this history still tended to be sketchy and disconnected and her responses generally exhibited little confidence.

Preunit Question #12. Why did the European countries want colonies? What were the advantages of having them?

Sento: I don't know.
I: So you know that they built the colonies but you don't know why they were interested in having them?
S: Right.
I: Now for example, the Spanish they built missions and the French built trading posts. Why did they want those things?
S: I don't know, I guess so they could get stuff.

Jarona: To be more powerful.
I: Why would that make them more powerful?
J: Because you have more land across the world, I guess.
I: Why does having more land make you more powerful?
J: I don't know. The more land you have. . .I don't know because I just remember when we studied in here. . .in this class, Spain was like the most powerful by 1750 or something like that or 1580 or something. . .and they had like control of the most land across the world so. . . . I don't know why. . . .

Amber: I don't know. I guess the more people he had and like the Indians were like conquered then it would be easier to keep them from coming back and. . .it would be more easy. . .the more people he had, the more control. It was better for the queen and king.
I: Why is that?
A: 'Cause they'd be known for more land and they'd be known. . .I mean they'd say like the king and queen might only have a little bit of land and all of a sudden she'd get even more and it would be like you know (inaudible).
I: Do you remember studying about this before or are you just thinking this through or how do you understand it?
A: No, I studied it in fifth grade.

With extended questioning, both Jarona and Amber were able to make some sense of European motives and provide fairly direct and explicit answers. Some of this can be attributed to the fact that the class had recently explored motives for the acquisition of colonies by European countries in general. However, Amber did claim fifth grade as the source of her knowledge, an attribution that occurred only sporadically with these students. Sento remained a reticent interviewee, often unable to reconstruct much more than reluctant guesses or I-don't-know responses.

Preunit Question #16: Have you ever heard of Jamestown colony? How about the Plymouth colony?

Justine: I've heard of it but I can't remember what it means.
I: How about Plymouth Rock or Plymouth colony?
J: Yea, didn't it come over on like the Mayflower? Yea, the pilgrims.
I: Tell me more about that.
J: They came over and settled, don't exactly know where, but they came over and set up camp. . .and they just explored the area and they made friends with the Indians.

Randy: Mmm Hmm. I've been there before but I don't know much about it.
I: It was one of the earliest English colonies. Do you know anything about it?

R: Not really.
I: How about the Plymouth colony, sometimes called Plymouth Rock?
R: Yea, that rings a bell but, I mean I don't really remember much about it. I'd have to like get my memory refreshed.

Amber: I think I've heard of it. I don't remember [much]. All I remember is I guess once I heard it but I don't remember anything about it.
I: How about Plymouth colony?
A: Yea. I know it's really popular and it's like Plymouth Rock. I think it's Plymouth Rock and they had like, I don't know, I guess you had to. . .I don't know. That's when the first pilgrims or something settled. . . .
I: Where do you remember that from?
A: I watched it from a cartoon on TV.

In the question that followed this one, students were asked about the pilgrims. All 6 students were able to tell a fairly convincing story about this group, describing them as the settlers who made friends with the Indians and scarcely managed to survive the first winter. However, the terms Plymouth colony and Jamestown had little similar currency. The linkages between the experiences of people in these early colonies—pilgrims, Puritans, and Jamestowners alike—appeared to be lost on these students (assuming at least that some connections were made in elementary school). Despite remembering the terms, students were stuck, unable to thread together some coherent conception of these early colonial experiences.

One of the six students, Patty, displayed a fairly rich recollection of this period in the preunit interviews. When she was asked to talk about European exploration and colonization (preunit question #1) and then about the source of her prior knowledge, she said,

> Well I remembered that there was. . .that the Spanish and the French and the English were the main people to claim land. I remember that from fifth grade. Basically that's all we really learned about in fifth grade. We learned a little bit of the routes that they took on their boats and which directions they went. And we learned mostly about the colonies that the English. . .where the English built certain colonies, that's mostly what we learned about. We [also] learned there was 13 of them and they were. . .all were in North America on the eastern border. And I remember some of them but I can't remember all of them.
> I: What do you remember?

P: Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina and South Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware.
I: What do you remember about life in those colonies?
P: That there was high taxes. The King put high taxes on everything and that's what led to the Boston Tea party and later to the Revolution the people wanted to break off and start a new. . .their own country.

Asked if her fifth-grade teacher had helped her make this sort of sense of the period, she said,

Actually, our fifth grade teacher was not that great, but my parents reinforced me on that.
I: How do you mean?
P: Because my parents were always like. . .because that was like the first year that I was doing really well in school because I was dyslexic, so learning was always one of my hardest experiences and that year it was the first year I got on the honor roll because my parents they would stay up and help me out and make me understand. They wouldn't like let me go to sleep until I understood what I was reading.

A fund of prior knowledge appeared to help Patty make better sense of what she learned during the unit. In the postunit interviews, her responses generally grew more articulate and displayed broader understanding of the material studied . For the second part of the questionnaire, she also appeared more lucid and produced a more coherent narrative relative to other accounts. The extra assistance she received from her parents apparently assisted her in making connections between and among historical events and details during the unit, a process that much of the time eluded her classmates.

Representing the Unit to Students

Prior to the unit on British colonization, the students had examined European exploration activities. They had studied a variety of explorers, ranging from Columbus to Cabot, the kings and queens on whose behalf they explored, their motives, and the geographical features of the expeditions. Following this, students plunged headlong into the unit on British colonization of the Atlantic seaboard. This unit was designed to provide a background for the American Revolutionary period considered at the

beginning of the ninth-grade year and the objectives were written with this goal in mind.

The class began by considering the original Virginia colonies, the one at Roanoke that disappeared, and the subsequent successful effort at Jamestown. Based on information they were provided by a map key, students conducted an exercise in which they predicted where the colony of Jamestown would be located. Using the textbook, supplemental short readings (some primary documents), and various assignment activities taken from the textbook series, students examined the development of the Virginia colonies. The focus was primarily economic. Students studied charters and land grants, how the colonists cultivated the land, how joint stock companies provided for capital investments, and how trading companies conducted the "triangular" trade pattern, supporting mercantilism. Governmental procedures, including the General Assembly and House of Burgesses, also were considered.

Following a chronological tack, the class shifted to the development of the New England colonies. Staple fare such as the Puritans, Separatists, and pilgrims; religious freedom; the Plymouth colony; the Mayflower Compact; the Salem witch trials; and key New England leaders anchored this portion of the curricular offering. More obscure concepts such as bicameral legislatures, freedmen and selectmen, the body politic, rule by law, and civil ordinances also were taken up. Much of the focus in this portion of the unit was on the Puritans and pilgrims and how they adapted socially, economically, and politically to the colonial experience.

The unit concluded with an examination of the Middle Colonies. (The Carolinas were added at this point because their settlement followed historical chronology.) Groups of students were required to research and construct multimedia reports on the colonies they had chosen. At the end of this segment of the unit, students presented their reports to the class. One group, that later in the semester through fund-raising took a two-day trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, spent a good share of their time

researching many social historical facets of this once important and recently refurbished colonial city.

Overall, the unit went smoothly. Students attended to assignments, projects, and in-class activities. There was however a notable lack of enthusiasm for the historical content. Most students "engaged" because they appeared more concerned about their grades rather than because they possessed much intrinsic interest in the historical record. There were a few exceptions such as Patty.

Postunit Reconstructions

Following their lengthy and in-depth study of the colonial period, one would expect the students to form rather sophisticated understandings about this historical period and be able to articulate them with little trouble. However, this occurred too infrequently given the time expended on and the educational resources devoted to this unit. Generally, in both postunit interview responses and questionnaire narratives, a number of students produced a form of "factual stew," confusing details from one set of events with others (e.g., conflating the experiences of different colonial groups) and occasionally being unable to recreate events and their contexts at all. The initial quote by Randy is fairly representative of a breakdown in the reconstruction process. Here are other examples interspersed with those that demonstrate how the unit learning experience did aid the development of understanding in some students (in Justine's case particularly). The examples trace the students sampled earlier through to their parallel postunit responses, allowing pre-post "changes" to be examined more closely.[6]

Postunit Question #1. You have been studying how the Europeans, especially the British, explored and later built colonies in North America. Tell me what you know about these explorers and colonies.

[6] Prenuit question #9 did not have a postunit counterpart. It was replaced by a question thought to be more salient to the postunit interview process. However, most of the preunit questions had close if not exact postunit parallels (see the appendix). Space considerations limit the number of these questions and student responses that can be examined in this paper. Of those considered, efforts were made to select the most representative ones.

Justine: Well they came to find a place where they could study their. . .practice their religion really and because in England they weren't allowed to practice their religion there; well the kind of religion they wanted and so they came here to find a place where they could do that. And they settled along the east coast, I think at first.
I: East coast of?
J: North America. And like you know the Plymouth and London colonies and stuff like that. . . Plymouth and Virginia. Then they shared land in between them.
I: When you say "they came," who's they?
J: Uh, I know one of them is Sepertance or Spartatence, I don't know how to pronounce their name. It was S-P-E-R-E-T-I-anous, I think.
I: Are you talking about the Separatists?
J: Yea, that's what I meant Separatists, the Separatists. I forgot how to pronounce the name, and then the Puritans came and some other people.
I: Where were they coming from?
J: They were coming from England. Some were coming from Spain, I think, and France. I think that's all I remember. (pause) The Indians were there before they came. But then the people from England, and Spain, and France came and they took over their land.
I: So how did the Africans get here?
J: Slavery. They came against their will.

Randy: Well they were looking for spices and stuff like that to bring back to the queen and well most of them didn't end up like Columbus where they intended to be. They ended up here but they thought they were in China or where ever they were supposed to be going.
I: They were actually headed for China?
R: Yea. China or India. . .but they didn't know North America was there.
I: When you say "they," who are you talking about?
R: The explorers that came from like England and Europe. Spain. Like those places in Europe around. . .I can't remember exactly but it's like England, Spain, um. . . those are all I can think of really.

Patty: They were originally looking for a route to Asia, an all-water route to Asia, and found a little trouble when they ran into land. They went as far into America by boat as the Saint Lawrence River and to the Great Lakes and they weren't too interested at first until they thought they might be able to find gold and then they started looking for gold and when they realized they weren't gonna find any gold, they became less interested with the land. And the French basically were claiming the northern parts like Canada and the British held back for a while but when they started claiming land. They were claiming it along the eastern coast of the U.S. and, what is now the U.S., and the Spanish were claiming along Central America.
I: Can you remember any of the names of some of those explorers?
P: I can't remember really many of the names of the explorers but I can remember who sent charters with people to claim land. Like King Henry sent charters to start colonies along the um, along the um, what do you call it. . .the east coast and they started like the Virginia colony and they also have like the London Company.

I: So these were all English that you're talking about?
P: The French claimed up along in Canada and they had a lot of the land at first and then they started not really paying attention to the lower parts of North America.
I: What's the difference between exploring and colonizing?
P: Colonizing is when you send people to actually set up settlements and live there.

If added length of response is any indicator of knowledge growth and increased understanding, one could argue that students gained somewhat. Several students did develop a better sense of aspects of the colonial experience, judging by the changes in responses to this parallel pre-postunit question. But a closer examination of their reconstructions tells a more subtle story.

Justine's preunit response began with the claim that she couldn't remember that far back. Her ideas seemed partially formed and disorganized. Following the unit, they still lacked complete coherence, but, appearing confidant, she reconstructed the freedom-of-religion rationale that drove several colonial developments. She noted colonies located in Virginia (without naming Jamestown) and at Plymouth, identified the Separatists and the Puritans, and with further questioning demonstrated a basic understanding of the struggles between the colonists and the Native Americans, the source of slavery, and fighting among different countries over settlements. But her responses still lacked the depth one might have expected given the time devoted to these issues.

Randy began with promise, noting the shorter trade routes that early explorers had hoped to find, their inadvertent encounter with North America, and that England and Spain were involved. However, after this brief account, his ability to reconstruct events began to fail. Randy's postunit response emerged as only marginally more sophisticated than his preunit one. His reconstruction here foreshadowed much of the rest of his responses, culminating in his frustration "with too many details" in postunit question 10.

Patty continued to build on what she already knew before the unit. Her postunit response was articulate and detailed and can serve as an exemplary retelling within the context of this eighth-grade class.

Postunit Question #7. Why did these countries want colonies? What were the advantages of having them?

Sento: They would have new land.
I: What was the advantage of having new land?
S: Like they would be able to do more stuff.
I: So why would the king of England want to have a lot of colonies?
S: I'm not sure.

Jarona: 'Cause they could earn money and cause I remember some of them they like trapped beavers and stuff for beaver skin, beaver fur. They used them to earn money.
I: Any other ways that it would help the kings and queens?
J: Um. . . they had more land; the more land the more powerful you were.
I: So, if England could get more colonies, they would be more powerful then a country like France?
J: Yea, they owned less land.

Amber: Because if they had. . .if they came to other states. . .I mean if they came to different countries and put down colonies, the more land they'd have and the more the king would get, you know the more land you had the better. So I guess that's what the king wanted everyone to have, I mean him to have a lot of land.
I: How would having more land benefit the king?
A: I don't know. I mean if you had a lot of money, people would know you were around like that.
I: So that's the primary reason?
A: Not the only. . .I mean maybe because he didn't have enough land for all the people, so he wanted to send them off to do something, or in exchange, give back something to them if he let go of them or something. Like maybe they could grow something here and send it back there.
I: There was trade involved?
A: Yea, like corn or something like that.

On this postunit question, Sento appeared vague and unsure of himself, a pattern he repeated through most of his postunit responses. Jarona, by contrast, seemed self-assured, perhaps drawing on her earlier eighth-grade experience. She promptly offered two rationales for exploration and colonization—trade and land. Amber also appeared to understand the benefits of land acquisition, but seemed unsure of the underlying

reasons that made land claims in the "New" World a powerful motivator for European leaders. She knew it was connected to trade but not why trade produced advantage. None of the students spontaneously tied their responses to the actions of colonial trading companies or the concept of mercantilist economics, despite studying these ideas at some length.

Postunit Question #10. What was the Jamestown colony?

Justine: That was the first colony. . .was it the first colony? Yea it was. . .wait a minute. Yea, it was first colony that the English built in Virginia. They had a colony there and they had like you know church and everything and they had different people working and just had them a little town there. They [were] like practicing their own religion. And they had more freedom then they did in England.
I: How did they survive?
J: I think the Indians taught them how to grow crops. Grow corn and stuff like that and they hunted for their food too. And everyone had like there own job like blacksmith or a cooper. . .somebody who makes baskets. Others were clothes makers and stuff like that.
I: Did they trade?
J: I don't remember. They might have. It would be kind of difficult going back and forth across the Atlantic ocean.
I: Why's that?
J: Because it takes a long time to get back to England and then keep going back and forth just to trade stuff. I think they had everything they needed there.
I: Do you know what their major crops were?
J: I think it was corn or I want to say tobacco but I'm thinking later days.
I: How did they, the Jamestown people, govern themselves?
J: They had a governor, John White was their governor and he got mess-. . .he got. . .I think he ruled them like you know told them. . .not told them what to do but took care of their problems and stuff and their money.
I: So who was in charge of him?
J: The king, through charters. . .which granted them land. When the king gave them a list of um. . .let them. . .it granted them land in North America. So the king gave it to them so they could go to North America.

Justine began in Jamestown but quickly conflated it with the Plymouth experience. She then drew on her knowledge of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, wedding blacksmiths and coopers to early seventeenth-century Jamestown. She was unsure about trade with England but speculated that the Jamestowners had everything they needed and were therefore unlikely to have engaged in cross-Atlantic exchanges.

She said this despite learning about the importance of trade to trading companies, the colonists, kings and queens, and to the economics of mercantilism. She did demonstrate a rudimentary understanding of charters and governance procedures in Jamestown and recalled John White.

Patty: Jamestown I think was moved once because it was originally settled in land that was very marshy and they had to move it because of the mosquitoes and malaria and it was 'cause malaria was deadly back then and so they had to move the colony. It was in Virginia. [It was an] English colony.
I: Do you remember the date?
P: No. Something in the eighteen hundreds.
I: Who was in charge of the colony and how did get on?
P: Well, I think what happened after Jamestown was started and other colonies got started, you know Jamestown was pretty successful at first except some people refused to work and so, I can't remember the guys name. . .I think it was John something, John Smith or something like that, came up with a rule of "no work, no eat," you know, "you can't eat if you don't work" and so you know people would rather . . .'cause people were sill looking for gold and stuff, they weren't working. And so they got them to work you know and so by saying "you couldn't eat if you didn't work," people started working and getting the colony together.
I: If they hadn't done that, what would have happened?
P: The colony would have completely died off. Everyone would have died of starvation. I think tobacco was one of. . .the Indians taught one of, John Rolfe I think it was, how to grow tobacco and so they started growing tobacco as well which became one of Virginia's main cash crops.
I: How was the colony governed?
P: The charter decided how Jamestown was governed. I think in Jamestown it was governed by if any laws were you know, if anyone wanted to make a law, it had to go through the king first or the queen. [I also remember]. . .something to do with Powhatan and Pocahontas. Powhatan's daughter was Pocahontas. She was kidnapped by some of the settlers and so there was a you know a dispute going on between them. And somehow Pocahontas ended up marrying I think it was John Rolfe and so that helped a to make a sort of end to a conflict you know the fighting between the Indians and the Americans because Powhatan was the chief of his tribe.

Patty continued to provide detailed, narrative reconstructions of colonial events. She was aware of key names, locations, problems, and subplots in Jamestown's development. One could argue that she also demonstrated a degree of empathy with the trevails of early Jamestown settlers. And empathy and understanding may well be different pieces of the same fabric.

Amber: I don't know if I remember. We did that a long time ago. I know it was one of the most popular colonies and. . . I mean among all of them and they had religious fights a lot.
I: Who was fighting?
A: I don't remember. I mean the ones that were thinking about having free religion which everyone wanted. . .you to have whatever religion and there was another one fighting that you know you had to have the same religion as everybody else because they were fighting a lot.
I: Do you know who some of the leaders were in the Jamestown colony?
A: I don't remember.
I: How about where was it located?
A: Nope.
I: Where did they first settle Jamestown?
A: Plymouth Rock.

Amber's ideas about "religious fighting" may be tied to European experiences with intolerance. However, she implied that they were evident in Jamestown. In the end, she seemed to be attributing Puritan experiences to the Jamestown colonists. Transposing one set of colonial experiences over those of others emerged frequently in these students' responses. Patty was the only interviewee to consistently demonstrate understanding of the differences.

Postunit Question #11. What was the Plymouth colony?

Justine: Plymouth had something to do with the pilgrims. Ah, they came over from Great. . .I don't know. I know they came over from part of England and they settled there and they had their own, their um, their colony there. At Plymouth.
I: Is that near Jamestown or is it in a different place or?
J: No, Jamestown was in Virginia, Plymouth was in. . .I think it was in Virginia just a little further up. I don't know exactly where. Um. . .they came and they made friends with the Indians and that's why we have Thanksgiving. And the Indians taught them how to grow crops and everything.
I: Why were the pilgrims interested in coming to Plymouth?
J: They wanted to practice their own religion too from England and for more freedom like a lot of people.
I: How was Plymouth governed?
J: I don't think they had a governor, I think they just had. . .I don't know.

Randy: I think it was not too far away [referring to Jamestown]. I don't think it was that close though. I don't know.
I: Do you remember any of the leaders?
R: It was either. . .somebody there was like a James; I think it was John White or. . .I don't remember. I think it was John White though.

I: There was this thing called the Mayflower Compact. Do you remember anything about that?
R: I think so. I think it was like a paper that like gave. . .it was like a document that gave. . .I don't know exactly what it did 'cause I remember we read it. It gave the people of the Plymouth colony their rights to do certain things, things that they weren't supposed to do and who they were supposed to listen to and it was written like over in France or somewhere like there. I don't remember much.
I: So who signed it?
R: The king, King Henry I think it was, yea, it was the King Henry, he signed it and it was one of the people that were high up. They signed it and sent it over.

Amber: Well, the Europeans came there first.
I: Which country were they from?
A: Britain. They came their first.
I: Do you remember any of leaders of Plymouth Colony?
A: Nope.
I: Do you know how the Plymouth colony was governed?
A: Well, they. . .I know by religion. And they had people, like I guess, yea, by religion most of all. I mean you couldn't do something unless it was against the religion. . .so most of it was because of that.
I: The rules came out of their religion?
A: Yea (pause).
I: One of the things that you talked about in class was the Mayflower Compact. What is that about?
A: The Mayflower Compact was an agreement for some sort of. . .I know it was an agreement or something, but I don't remember that something.
I: Who was agreeing about it?
A: The Europeans. . .about something that I don't remember. I guess it was land or something.
I: Another thing you talked about in class was called a charter, a royal charter. What is that?
A: I guess it's a trading thing or I think that's the one. Well, the traders will give I guess the farmers at the end, they'll grow it and they'll give back whatever percent or interest or whatever, give it back to the trading company and the trading company would give some to the king.

Loose connections and partially formed ideas continued to appear in the interviewees' responses. Students tended to stumble over the "too-many-details" phenomenon. Justine recalled the Thanksgiving story and the desire for religious freedom among the pilgrims, but she located the colony in Virginia and was unsure of self-rule procedure at Plymouth, despite studying the importance of the Mayflower Compact. Asking about the Compact explicitly became a frequent follow-up question,

typically did not offer it spontaneously as a response to the query about colonial self-government.

Randy continued to experience difficulties, conflating Plymouth with Jamestown and relating a partially formed conceptualization of the Mayflower Compact. At one point he suggested that the Compact originated in France. For her part, Amber thought Plymouth was the first colony and also was unsure about how the Compact influenced government in the Plymouth colony. In an unusual but perhaps astute way, she observed that religion was the government at Plymouth. She ended with a partly conceptualized idea of a royal charter and its relationship to trading companies and their practices.

Response patterns characterized by either inability to reconstruct accounts or the appearance of partially formed concepts and ideas interspersed with an occasionally coherent description flowed through many of the remaining questions. After 7 weeks on British colonial history, these students, with the exception of Patty, left the experience with little in the way of conceptually-anchored understandings. Knowledge of details, events, and terms alone provided no guarantee of increasing this understanding.

Discussion and Implications

What can be concluded about these students' responses? How can their oral reconstructions be understood? Why do most of them consistently have difficulties reconstructing what they learned in this indepth unit? What implications might their responses have as they prepared to encounter the American Revolution period in tenth grade? At least 3 interrelated points warrant consideration: (a) the importance of prior knowledge and historical sense-making, (b) the need for more powerful conceptual themes or scaffolds on which to build an understanding of the period than chronological structure alone, and (c) the potential for increasing students' meaning-making experiences by supplying them with significant reasons for learning history and

connecting historical study to their personal lives. The last point is of considerable substantive concern; I therefore begin with the importance of providing a rationale for studying history.

The Value of Learning History

Arguably, at the center of these students difficulties was their sense about why they were learning British colonial history specifically and North American history generally. Near the end of the postunit interview, students were asked to talk about why they thought so much time was spent on British colonial history and why it was important to learn. Justine's response was probably typical. She said, "I guess to know how your country began or started." The interviewer, in an effort to get her to say more, said, "Well, so what?" Justine retorted, "That's the same thing I said. I mean it's not going to help us when we grow up or anything!" Later she added, "But it's good to know just in case. Like say on Jeopardy—they ask you a question and you'll know the answer."

Jarona responded bluntly, "I have no idea because I think it's pointless. It doesn't have anything to do with now. I think we should study government more than we should the past." She later added that she found the material irritatingly boring. Sento said simply, "So they make sure you don't forget." Randy thought he would prefer to study about other countries' histories. He thought colonial history's personal value for him was tied up in his ability "to like impress somebody I know from my job when I get older," without specifying the job. Amber suggested that one might want to know this history if they wished to become an anthropologist. When asked about its personal importance for her, she said, "I don't know. I mean I wanna be a physical therapist so I don't know."

Patty emerged as the only enthusiastic proponent for learning colonial history. However, her rationale hinged on her personal interest in American history in general, an interest she said she had developed in elementary school. When asked why it might

be important for everyone to learn, she said she was unsure and appeared to apologize for her classmates who found their study of the colonies less than appealing.

It might be more than coincidental that this British (read "white-people's") history resonated most with Patty. Of the interviewees, Patty was the only white student. The other students' non-white backgrounds may have predisposed them to find this history of little personal value. However, they said nothing in the interviews to suggest that they found British colonial history irrelevant or uninteresting because it was a "white, European-oriented history." Nevertheless, this may have played an ironic role; how much a role is difficult to tell, but it is a consideration not to be overlooked. Having said this however, it is important to note that females typically have been written out of history as well. One is left to speculate that, if Patty found few women in her historical study, perhaps the ethnocentric "match" resonated with her more than the gender issue. The potential for irony here also is not to be missed.

Now the refrain that history (like school in general) is irrelevant and boring is common among adolescents. No one appears unusually shocked when they hear it. However, what was striking about these students' responses was the degree to which, after extensive questioning, they produced rationales for studying history only tangentially linked to their present experience. They frequently suggested that the value of learning history, if it was to be had at all, was not to be realized until much later in their lives. Seizing spontaneously upon powerful presentist rationales for learning history failed to occur. When pressed, the students cast about for salient responses as though they were fishing a stream they doubted contained any fish.

The point of noting this involves realizing that these students need help from adults (parents, teachers) who can provide suitable, or at least somewhat palatable, personally connective rationales for historical study. These rationales could certainly vary to include (a) the useful (but often trite) "you need to know where you've been in order to know where you are going" (which could be personalized to adolescent

relationships—learning another's history before taking significant interpersonal risks with him/her), (b) the related idea, "as citizens in a democracy, understanding of the past is critical to informed decisionmaking" (coupled with classroom opportunities to engage this idea), and/or (c) that learning history can be about accounting for one's identity, both private and collective. Other more personally compelling rationales also could be developed and are certainly available (e.g., Becker, 1935; Collingwood, 1946). See Kobrin (1992) for an example of how students found meaning in writing their own histories.

In the end, without some effort at co-constructing substantive, personally meaningful rationales with students, they have difficulty developing them on their own. To the extent that these students are representative, it seems clear that rationales such as "history for its own sake" or "because that's what the curriculum says and there is a test Friday" or "because it will help you when you get to high school or college" provide little currency. Absent recognizable value in the lives of these adolescents, study of British colony-building in North America makes little sense, builds on virtually nothing in their personal experience, and results for the most part in the acquisition of disconnected facts without much coherent understanding, despite extended and detailed study (possible exceptions might be atypical history mavens like Patty).

Prior Historical Knowledge

Patty's understanding of the period likely derives from the edge she possessed going in. Her prior knowledge and sense, influenced by her elementary school experience and by parental augmentations, gave her a context in which to place what she was learning. It represented, as the cognitive theorists note, a scaffold on which she was able to build subsequent meaning. The other students appeared to lack this sort of prior knowledge.

If we assume that Patty is atypical for this group, then we must also assume that the students entering this eighth-grade course need considerably more help in sorting

through the thicket of British colonial history. These "average" students' prior knowledge was scattered and disconnected at best. The conceptual playing field needed to be leveled in order to prepare the way for scaffolding. Underscoring the importance of meaningful elementary school excursions into American history, this process could begin in fifth grade (for example), with an indepth, multifaceted examination of one colony, say Plymouth or Jamestown, situated within the context of European circumstances and motives for colonization, and construed around a rationale for why knowing this was important. Parents could build on this through school-home reading programs. But perhaps more importantly, eighth-grade students could benefit by beginning with a detailed exploration of what they know and understand about colonial history, lay some level groundwork themselves so to speak, and then start constructing a scaffold from that understanding. Context-building (and rebuilding) seems crucial to historical understanding.

Powerful Conceptual Themes

The chronological tour through this period—Jamestown to Plymouth to the Middle colonies—did little to enhance students' understanding. To the contrary, it appeared to produce the type of factual stew and fragmented understanding demonstrated most notably by Randy. These students never developed a method for sorting through all the details and events they studied in order to establish a sense of the larger importance of some matters and the relative insignificance of others (no doubt also related to the point about rationales for learning this history or rather their absence). Depth pursued from a chronological perspective alone appears to lack sufficient structure or meaning to produce significant understanding of the period.

To offset this, geographic, economic, political, and social history thematic/conceptual strands could be developed for example. Using these strands, colonial development up and down the seaboard could be compared and contrasted. Students could employ the strands to construct matrices for comparative purposes. The

strands themselves also could be interrelated (e.g., how geography influenced economic life). Their developing conceptual understandings would thereby be enhanced by the interlinking of the conceptual scaffolds. Figure 1 provides an example of how this matrix might be configured.

[insert Figure 1. about here]

Whatever the specific strategy, students would benefit considerably by learning to develop methods for identifying those features of historical change that are more or less significant. Such methods depend upon the construction of tentative hypotheses or hunches about the nature of historical developments. Students could explore and write their own as a method of anchoring their studies. Teaching practices could assist students in creating hunches around the strands identified above for example. Documents, audiovisual materials, and artifacts (if they are available) could serve as evidence in testing hunches.

Conclusion

These students seem ill-prepared for their tenth-grade American history course that begins with the American Revolution. Unless astute high school teachers assess these students' prior knowledge and work to build or rebuild the colonial context in which the revolution occurred, one wonders what sense students will make of it. It appears likely that factual stew will only increase and that it will develop at the expense of coherent historical understanding.

Perhaps too much is made here of what these students "lack." Perhaps these students are not representative of "average" eighth graders and maybe these students will sort all of this out in high school history anyway. So why all the fuss one might ask. I have noted that, at a minimum, 5 of the 22 students in this class came away from their study of early North American colonization without a coherent picture of this period—almost a quarter of the students in the class. This constitutes an ineffective and, for some, an unacceptable use of educational resources. To use them more wisely,

efforts could be made, if nothing more, to provide students like these with rationales for why studying this history this way is important (assuming the school community believes it is).[7] Also, resources could be expended in finding out more about how, qualitatively and in detail, students make sense (or do not) of the history they encounter across the curriculum, in particular classroom contexts. Specifically, additional studies might be sensitive to how minority and female students perceive and assess "white men's history."

[7] The wisdom of choosing to approach colonial history the way this school district has is clearly a debatable issue the treatment of which goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

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Appendix

Pre- and Postunit Protocol Questions

Question	Preunit	Postunit
The last time you studied/you have just finished studying about the exploration and the building of colonies in North America by the British./was in fifth grade. Tell me what you remember about the explorers and the colonies they built in North America.	+	+
The Americas were actually there for thousands of years. Why do you think it took the Europeans so long to explore them?	+	
Why were they exploring? What were they hoping to find?	+	+
Who were some of the explorers that came to the Americas from Europe? Where exactly did they come from?	+	
Exploring distant lands was expensive. Who financed these explorations and why?	+	
When the European explorers reached the Americas, who did they encounter?	+	
How were the Native Americans different from the Europeans? How were they similar?	+	
How did things change for the Native Americans in North America after the Europeans began exploring?	+	+
The explorers typically sailed back to Europe and reported what they had found. What happened next?	+	
After some time, European countries began building colonies in North America. What is a colony?	+	+
Which European countries built colonies in North America?	+	+
Why did these countries want colonies? What were the advantages of having them?	+	+
(Point to a map of the eastern seaboard of the U.S.) The colonies in this part of North America belonged to Great Britain. Why did they belong to Great Britain and not France or Spain?	+	+
Native Americans were already living here, so how could the English claim this land?	+	+
What were these early English colonies like?	+	

Have you ever heard of the Jamestown colony? (If so, explain.) How about the Plymouth colony? (explain)	+	+
Who were the Pilgrims? What do you know about them? (If necessary, why did they leave England?)	+	+
Who were the Puritans? Tell me everything you know about them. How were they similar to/different from the pilgrims?		+
Many of the colonies were built along waterways. Why do you think that was?	+	+
What do you know about the development of what was called the middle colonies?		+
How did the colonies change over time?	+	+
The colonies traded with England? How did this work and who benefited from it? (probe extensively)		+
How were the colonies governed? Who were the leaders? Did they have rules, laws, a government? Explain.	+	
England ruled the colonies on the eastern seaboard for about 200 years, but then these colonies became the United States of America. How did that happen?	+	+
Why do you think they teach you about the history of how North America was colonized? Why might it be important to learn about that?		+
Why do you think they teach about history in school?	+	
How might learning history help in your life? How about in your life away from school?	+	
What did you find interesting or memorable in this study of British colonization?		+

Table 1. Unit Objectives for the British North American Colonization Unit

Identify the factors that influenced the settlement of the United States
- Examples:
  - Examine the causes of European exploration and settlement in North America
  - Examine patterns of exploration and settlement
  - Identify reasons why the English colonized North America

Describe major social, economic, and political developments in the 13 colonies between 1607 and 1763
- Examples:
  - Locate colonial developments on a map of North America
  - Describe and characterize early colonial settlements
  - Examine trading patterns between England and the colonies
  - Describe how trading companies worked
  - Identify and describe colonial efforts at self-rule
  - Identify early colonial social and religious life

Figure 1. Thematic Strands Matrix

	Early Colonies		Later Colonies		
	Plymouth	Jamestown	New England	Middle	Southern
Geography					
Economic Life					
Social/Cultural Experience					
Political Life					