# THE POWER OF A WOMAN'S STORY: A THREE-STEP APPROACH TO HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN HIGH SCHOOL WORLD HISTORY

JADA KOHLMEIER

I may not remember all the facts you taught us, but I'll never forget these women's stories.
-Whitney, ninth grade world history student

Whitney is communicating the connection my students felt to three women whose stories they evaluated in ninth grade world history. The women represented ordinary people living during time periods we were studying and their personal stories demonstrated how the political, economic and cultural events we studied had an impact on people in unique and powerful ways. With the growing body of research into various aspects of historical thinking—such as why history should be taught,[1] how historical thinking should be defined,[2] why teachers were or were not engaging in historical thinking instruction,[3] how historians engage in historical thinking,[4] and how historical thinking is being incorporated into classrooms[5]—I was inspired by several studies calling for more research into the relationship between teacher and student in historical thinking and how the process is experienced in classrooms.[6] Some researchers argued that the novelty of the experience was the major obstacle for students as they attempted to interpret documents, write a historical narrative or exercise historical empathy.[7] As a full-time high school social studies teacher writing a dissertation, I was in a position to take advantage of my opportunity to study the consistent use of instructional strategies that might expose a new dimension of the complex relationship between these strategies and students' abilities.

Because the field of historical thinking is so broad, I narrowed the focus to three aspects of historical thinking used by S. G. Grant: historical knowledge, historical significance and historical empathy.[8] Grant defined each of these as follows: historical knowledge is an epistemological understanding that history is an interpretive discipline, consisting of a collection of stories, rather than a static, indisputable narrative; historical significance involves evaluating the importance of a document or story in relation to the greater historical record and weighing the value of that account by placing it in the broader context of the past; and historical empathy moves beyond historical imagination to appreciating the perspective of people of the past and attempting to understand their motives, beliefs and behaviors. Elizabeth Yeager and Stuart Foster suggest that "empathy merits special attention because historians must bring it to their inquiry in order to analyze the events, actions and words of key figures in the historical record."[9] O. L. Davis summarizes historical empathy most succinctly, as "imagination restrained by evidence."[10] Although students demonstrate difficulty with this skill, numerous research studies show that they are capable of doing so and will improve with practice.[11] This skill set of recognizing multiple perspectives, considering other points of view, separating significant from insignificant information and evaluating the validity of sources represents important skills for citizens of a democratic society. Most of my world history students will not become professional historians, but they are all citizens in our democracy and need these skills to evaluate the complex issues facing our electorate.

Based on studies demonstrating that historians were much more critical and evaluative in their reading of primary sources when compared to high school students, I was inspired to challenge ninth-grade world history students to read and analyze historical documents more critically.[12] I chose personal narratives from ordinary women living during three time periods we intended to study. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton argue, "Studying a range of perspectives helps students understand discrimination,

marginalization, and opposition as well as power and privilege."[13] Paul Gagnon asserts that we should focus on human agency by emphasizing the ways in which people resisted, endured, ignored, and even acquiesced to oppression and injustice.[14] I selected letters written by a woman to her merchant husband during the Renaissance,[15] an interview with a Russian peasant living under Stalin's regime,[16] and a memoir of a twelve-year-old girl during Mao's Cultural Revolution in China.[17] By evaluating these stories, the students had an opportunity to exercise Grant's three aspects of historical thinking in that they would be *interpreting* the historical *significance* of a woman's story by determining what her document reveals about the time period in which she lives, but also *empathizing* with her personal situation within the historical context.

To lead the world history students into a deeper analysis of primary sources, I designed a three-step set of instructional strategies to mirror the process used by historians; it was intended to provide a consistent structure for their analysis, yet allow for flexibly in adapting to different types of sources. The students would create a reading web based on their initial reading, discuss the documents in a Socratic seminar and finally write a historical essay comparing the woman's experience to their prior knowledge of the period. Each strategy was designed to build upon the former: the web would introduce them to the document and provide a framework for the rich data in the text, the seminar would allow for a more in-depth discussion to deepen their understanding of the document, and the essay would allow them to create new meaning based upon their assessment of the primary source. My interest, however, was not in the strategies themselves, but in the thinking they might produce if used consistently over the course of a semester. To study my three-step approach I designed a bounded system case study,[18] in which I played the dual role of teacher/researcher and asked, what would be the effect of consistently using a three-step instructional approach on the historical thinking of ninth-grade world history students?

Because so many studies discussed previously have demonstrated the novelty of historical thinking creates difficulty in assessing students' abilities, I wanted to utilize this opportunity to work with the same students consistently over the course of a semester. I also wanted to study the interchange between teaching strategies and students' historical thinking. Since I was playing the dual role of teacher/researcher, this gave me a unique opportunity to evaluate the relationship between the three-step approach and my students' historical thinking abilities. In order to give adequate voice to my students in an article-length piece, I will limit the focus of my discussion to the reading web and its influence on the students' abilities in historical significance. The web was the first activity in the three-step approach and encouraged the students to consider not only what information was presented in the document, but also how and why that document was created.

## Procedures: A Three-Step Approach to Historical Inquiry

### *Preparation for Reading Historical Documents*

In order to introduce my students to each set of documents, I designed a pre-reading "grabber" intended to both capture their interest in the source as well as introduce them to the type of document they would be reading. For Magdalena's letters, I asked them to imagine they found letters in an attic in Germany, and then write ten questions they would want answered about them. They shared their questions with the class and I wrote them on the board. This led to an interesting discussion about what types of historical documents would be important. Many said if the letters were written by historically important figures they would be more interesting and useful to historians than if they were written by regular people, while several students added they felt the stories of ordinary people would help us understand the famous events more clearly. For Irina's interview, I asked them to imagine they had an opportunity to interview someone who had lived under Joseph Stalin's rule. We discussed the influence question selection could have on the information and perspective of the historical source. We also discussed the importance of asking open-ended questions and re-wrote any questions that could be answered with a yes or no. I introduced Ji Li's memoir by showing a short clip from the movie *The Last Emperor* showing a demonstration hosted by the Red Guard in which teachers and journalists are being publicly humiliated with da-zi-bao. I asked the students to make educated guesses about what was

occurring, who the victims were, why they might have been targeted and what the motives might be of the Red Guard.

*Reading Web*

Reading historical documents is the best exposure to the "strangeness" of the past.[19] The language, subject matter, writing style and expressions demonstrate better than anything else how differently people thought, communicated, believed, and even acted in the past. In order to help students analyze the documents, I designed a graphic reading guide to help them organize their thinking based on Sam Wineburg's study explaining how historians read primary documents. To simplify his complex assessment of the historian's thought process, I created a "document web" that replaced Wineburg's terms for simple, one-word questions:

| Wineburg's Model from Historians | Kolmeier's Reading Web Questions |
|---|---|
| Representation of text | What? (What is the document describing?) |
| Representation of the event | How? (How was the document written?) |
| Representation of the subtext | Why? (Why was the document written?) |

The reading web's purpose was not only to introduce students to the author's point of view, but also to provide a visual representation of the information they felt was most important about the author's situation. The "why" and "how" questions asked the students to consider the perspective of the author and the document's authenticity. The "what" section of the web would be their first opportunity to make decisions about the most significant historical aspects of the document. The web was primarily meant to be a preparation for the next step, the Socratic seminar.

*Taking on Historical Perspective*

The Socratic seminar allowed the entire class to discuss an essential question designed to encourage consideration of the perspective of the author. The reading guide merely introduced this crucial aspect of historical thinking by asking "how" and "why" the documents were created, but did not encourage a thoughtful consideration of the author's perspective. The Socratic seminar style of discussion encouraged "participants [to] seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information."[20] It allowed me to remind them of their prior knowledge of the time period, challenge their assumptions about the beliefs and practices of the people, and assist them as they analyzed what information was important and what was inconsequential. These discussion sessions allowed us, as a class, to explore the texts at a deeper level, adding the layer of perspective taking to their analysis of the documents.

*Writing the Historical Essay*

A historian weaves a story by using threads from the primary source material, requiring both analysis and synthesis. I had the students write a response to a historical question that required them to create a picture of the time period we studied using both information from the documents and their prior knowledge. An example of a question they answered was, "What can we learn about the life and experiences of a typical woman in the time of the Renaissance by reading Magdalena's letters?" They answered the same question—re-worded to match the time period—for Irina and Ji Li. In writing their essay, they experienced firsthand three aspects of historical thinking described by Grant: *historical knowledge*, in the difficult process of interpreting the author's information, point of view and credibility; *historical significance*, while attempting to select what they felt was revealing and important historical information from the document; and *historical empathy*, as they attempted to understand the point of view of the author and their interpretation of the time period in which she lived.

## Research Design

*Participants*

For the research study, I selected a purposeful sample of ten students that best represented the fifty-two ninth graders I had in world history during the spring semester of 2001. At the time, I was teaching in a suburban school district in a Midwestern city with a fairly homogeneous population of white, middle class students. I conducted the study as a teacher/researcher in the subjects' first high school history class. To my knowledge, this was my students' first exposure to historical perspective taking and analyzing the authenticity of historical documents and narratives. To create my purposeful sample of ten students, I selected five boys and five girls from five different grade ranges. I chose a boy and girl who received a semester grade of A during the first semester, one each who received a B, and so forth. I also made sure that one boy and one girl were on Individual Education Plans through the special education department. In summary, I attempted to select the ten students who would most closely represent the range of my world history students.

*Data Collection*

This study would generate a large amount of data that could be triangulated. I had the students' work (i.e., reading webs, transcribed tapes of Socratic seminars and their historical narratives) to demonstrate their attempts at and understanding of historical thinking. I kept a detailed research log each day I planned or used a strategy, as well as notes to myself when reading and evaluating their work. As the third perspective, I had the students keep meta-cognition "historian journals" in which they talked to me about their thought processes with each of the strategies. I also conducted a group discussion at the end of the course with the subjects, in which they could share their thoughts and reactions to "doing history" throughout the semester.

*Data Analysis*

I used the grounded theory approach to finding meaning in my data by coding the data several times, looking for themes and/or concepts to emerge.[21] I began to identify five themes: recognize important information, perspective, view of history, self-centered and past versus present. As I continued to read more log entries and evaluate my codes, my list changed to the following: interpretation, important information, past versus present, empathy and evidence. Eventually, I settled on Grant's three aspects of historical thinking—knowledge, significance and empathy—because I felt they represent each of the five themes. "Important information" and "evidence" were addressed in *significance*; "past versus present" and "empathy" could be combined into *empathy*, because the same basic ideas were expressed by the students; and "interpretation" was similar to Grant's *knowledge*. As stated earlier, to give adequate voice to my students in this article, I have selected the data that emerged from the students' reading web and discuss what that revealed about their abilities in appreciating the historical significance of the document's author.

## Findings

> You don't really see it from one point of view, you see it from a whole bunch of peoples' so you look at a document and you see one person's point of view and it's more interesting because they give you facts about what was going on and it kind of made me more interested in history because like when you read a textbook all the people are all the same and this showed me not everyone was the same and people were different because they experienced things differently.
>
> —Jenna

In explaining her view of the historical significance every story provides, Jenna recognized that different individuals may be affected differently by historical events, and appreciated the value of those personal stories to our understanding of history. Even though the students' understanding of historical knowledge grew gradually over the semester, they immediately attempted to connect with the past differences and similarities they saw in the three documents, which Grant called historical significance. In his definition, Grant includes two aspects of historical significance: 1) deciphering what is historically

important or meaningful about a particular document, figure, law or event; and 2) what Wineburg calls "appreciating our shared humanity" while recognizing the important differences between our own period and the past. The "how" and "why" web sections asked the students to consider the potential bias or viewpoint of the author of the document, while the "what" section of the web section asked the students to determine the most important information presented in the source.

The web asked the students to select the topics from the documents that they felt were most important for understanding the period as well as each woman's experience. These women's stories illustrated the complexity of the time periods because their experiences challenged the students' preconceived notions of the roles women played in history and because the experiences of the women were not always typical, but often unique given the historical context. The students needed to compare these documents with their prior knowledge, which required comparing several texts, both secondary and primary. Finally, even though the documents were "one-sided" accounts, they included evidence of others who may or may not have held similar beliefs or had similar experiences to those of the authors. My students were stretched to recognize both the unique perspective of each woman, while also attempting to find a human connection through these women to an extremely distant time, space and culture.

Their selection of information in the first webs was sketchy and inconsistent. However, by the time they reached the Ji Li memoir, I saw consistent selection of topics and detailed supporting evidence for the "what" section of the web, which indicated a greater sophistication in considering the important information in the document. The "what" section of their webs from Magdalena's letters included phrases such as "what he should bring back," "death of little Balthasar," "his brother's wedding," and "problems she had with the wine controller." These phrases were vague and lacked detail. Other topics they felt were significant were "weddings," the "importance of religion," the fact that "Magdalena had a household helper," "she asked for a New Testament," "they had to travel to shop," and "many people died." Their responses, while correct and important, provided no indication as to why they considered these topics to be significant or evidence that they saw any connection to their prior knowledge of the Renaissance period.

The responses on their webs regarding Irina's interview became much more detailed and specific. Some representative main topics included family, children, siblings, parents, husband, work, education and abuse. The significant difference from their initial attempt was that the students elaborated on their main topics by including subtopics with connected web entries that added detail and specificity. For example, they added specific names of people and groups using the terms she used such as "kuloks" and then adding "wealthy peasants," or "Kolkhoz" and then adding "collective farms." They listed specific wars (e.g., WWII, the civil war between Red and White Armies) and leaders (e.g., Stalin, Lenin). They included facts such as "Irina lacked any education," "church was illegal, but she worshipped in secret," and "abuse by her father and two husbands," which almost always included their names. Even though they do not specifically explain why they considered these topics important, their increased attention to detail indicated that they were taking more care to be specific, and that they were anticipating the usefulness of the webs during the Socratic Seminar and essay writing that would follow.

Their final webs over Ji Li's memoir were even more consistent with each other and specific, identifying terms, names and events. These webs consistently included terms from the unit (e.g., Mao, Da-Zi-Bao, Red Guard, Cultural Revolution). They also included terms that we had discussed in the previous unit over communism in the Soviet Union such as proletariat and bourgeoisie, but this time they did not add a descriptor, which indicated that they knew these terms and did not need to include a definition. The consistency of event selection among the webs was interesting. Every student selected the three most significant events—the da-zi-bao at Ji Li's school, with her aunt and about her. This indicated that they had increased their sophistication in selecting the most historically significant aspects of the document. With every document, they included more detail and analysis, explaining why they felt each topic was significant. The increased use of vocabulary terms indicated that they were recognizing ways in which Ji Li's experience connected to their prior knowledge of the Cultural Revolution; in other words, they began thinking about the document as a window into a historical period. The students' learning progress became apparent: they mostly summarized Magdalena's letters; tentatively compared Irina's

interview with their understanding of Stalin's rule; and, finally, consistently compared and contrasted Ji Li's memoir with their knowledge of the Cultural Revolution.

What I found equally compelling were topics they did not include, especially in their first attempts. According to Wineburg, a historian reads a historical text to validate currently held knowledge, challenge existing understandings or illuminate an area of mystery.[22] My students did not "read between the lines" to achieve any of these three purposes. For example, in making their webs for Magdalena's letters, they did not mention what I considered to be a loving relationship between a wife who worries for the health and well-being of her husband and writes tender emotions and prayers to him. My reading of her letters gave me a deeper understanding of the role women played in a family business. My students did not recognize this. They also exposed their unsophisticated understanding of Renaissance social history and the difficulty that posed for them in making comparisons between Magdalena and others of her time. I saw a similar trend in the web over Irina. Students only listed her hardships, but did not include information about what might be causing those hardships. In their webs over Ji Li's memoir, they went beyond listing the major events and included details about why those events were important for understanding the Cultural Revolution. In his journal, Zach said, "Learning to complete the web actually helped out with understanding the document too. Looking at the documents, searching for information, forced me to try and combine ideas into one complete thought, and this showed me what the author was trying to tell me. This will undoubtedly help me in the future, while reading and assessing other writings." Completing the web assisted him in appreciating the historically significant information present in the documents, but it took him until the last one to truly grasp this realization.

In their metacognition journals, the students reveal some of their struggles with the webs during the first attempts, such as Magdalena's sixteenth century language. They discussed challenges posed by the document itself: their first attempt at using a new learning strategy, and the disconnect between applying their typical reading strategies to a historical text. They said, "She never really just came out and said what she meant." For example, I don't think they saw her as a loving wife because they did not see that in her writings. She writes formally and not in a style they are accustomed to, therefore they equated that with negativity.

In her first attempt, Chyla was not convinced the web was a valuable learning strategy. She said, "This strategy wasn't the best way I learned the material. Because this was my first experience with this sort of thing, I didn't quite get the hang of it and the information we began with was on the surface material. So I didn't understand it as thoroughly as I should have."

Zach reveals the perception of reading he came in with and demonstrated how differently reading historical documents is from reading their history text. "During the first stage, reading the letters and using the web, I was skeptical as to whether or not this was a productive use of my time. I thought that I would just skim through the letters, pick out the main topics, and be done with it. I soon found that this was not a very plausible idea. In order to complete the web, I had to use many of my advanced reading skills to pick up very specific mannerisms in order to get a more complete view of another writer's lifestyle. It was fairly difficult owing to the fact that, while not being able to assume things, you must piece facts together to create a full picture. That was probably the single, hardest thing to do in the entire project and was very frustrating because it wasn't just limited to the first stage; it was a constant struggle to remember this." Zach felt he could initially skim the letters and choose the important information. Because he was a strong reader, I'm sure this has been his successful strategy in reading expository writing. He was faced with a much more difficult task with this document because of its organization and language. He provided evidence of recognizing a new way of reading primary documents. He recognized the need to read this document with a broader purpose in mind than mere summation.

Brittany admitted the "main event" section was the most difficult because she struggled to find the main topic. She said her strategy was to read the letter once, then again paragraph-by-paragraph, putting information on her web. Obviously, this skill of historical significance is a great challenge to them and their first attempt was rough.

By the interview with Irina, the students' comments were restricted to the documents and their attempts to select important information for the "what" section of the web. Not one student mentioned

difficulty with understanding the mechanics of using the web, but instead remarked that the "how and why sections are a snap." Eric's comment reveals that he is trying unsuccessfully to apply his reading strategy of textbooks to this interview. "When I was filling out the web, I felt like it was hard to find something that I would be specifically looking for. I couldn't just go in order through the text and find what I wanted to find." Brandon was the only student who specifically addressed this issue. "In an assignment, typical research would be looking through a textbook. However, our mental thinking is not suited to finding information in a paper such as Irina's… I found it hard for me to decide how to lay out my information in the broad questions given. As I thought about the whole story, the answers seemed to blend with each question." Brittany wrote, "The most difficult part of the web was trying to figure out what was important to put on it and what wasn't. She gave so much detail in the interview that I couldn't tell what to put on the web. It's challenging because something you thought was important could not be to somebody else." Bob revealed that he began to consider the author's perspective in making his selections, "I tried to think about what Irina would want me to know about her."

In the metacognition journal over Ji Li's memoir, their comments focused on deciding what information was significant, but paid more attention to considering the author when making those difficult decisions. Chyla indicated a similar tactic to Bob's when deciding what to include on her web. She described her thought process in selecting the information for her web and said she tried to choose topics that mostly dealt with the common Chinese people and their lives but also events that seemed to deeply affect Ji Li so she could capture and understand the emotions that they would be experiencing. She said, "By looking into someone's behavior or reaction to the past, we can learn a lot." Zach reflected, "Learning to complete the web actually helped out with understanding the document. Looking closely at the documents, searching for information, forced me to try and combine ideas into one complete thought, and this showed me what the author was trying to tell me. This will undoubtedly help me in the future, while reading and assessing other writings." Their comments indicated a shift in their thinking about how to go about reading the documents, less like a textbook, and more consistently like a historian. Their experience with the webs suggested that with practice, students demonstrate a greater comfort with the interpretive nature of history. The strongest support for that follows their third attempt with historical analysis. Few students discussed the difficulty of selecting information or frustration with that task. They seemed accepting of that role and discussed more of what guided their selection, rather than being frustrated with having to do it. In their final web, the students consistently reported they did not worry as much about where the information should go on the web, and I saw more sophisticated understanding of the interpretation they were providing. This demonstrates that they grew increasingly comfortable with recognizing why a woman's story would be historically significant.

In addition to my students' experience with determining historical significance, I was also curious about the effect my exclusive use of women's primary documents might have on the students' motivation for reading the documents and if it would influence their abilities in determining historical significance. During the final group discussion, Zach said that he would have liked to have read some documents by men in addition to women. Brandon replied, "I never even noticed that," which was echoed by several other students. Brandon continued, "I never noticed they were all women. It seemed like we heard about men." Whitney, Jenna, Chris, Brittany, Bob, Chyla, and Jordan all echoed Brandon with similar comments such as, "we read about men," "they were very interesting," and "I liked hearing about women." Zach answered that he would just be interested in reading about other people of the same time period to compare their situations. Eric agreed, adding that he would have enjoyed reading Balthasar's letters to Magdalena to "understand their relationship and jobs in the marriage better." I was surprised that most of the students had not noticed they were exclusively women's documents and feel it is an interesting finding worthy of further investigation, as we consider the inclusion of women's social history as an enhancement to the traditional historical narrative. It also demonstrates an increased desire to read additional perspectives to those of the women they read.

## Implications and Questions

In the realm of historical significance, the students struggled in their first attempt because they were reading Magdalena's letters like they would a textbook. However, by the time they encountered Ji Li's memoir they were consistently comparing her situation to what they understood of the Cultural Revolution, therefore changing the way they approached information in a historical document. Although I saw improvement in the students' approach to reading the documents for their importance to the historical record, they were not reading with the same level of sophistication as that of a historian. The students demonstrated a tendency to select information that connected to their prior knowledge but fell short of using the documents to test that knowledge. This suggests their knowledge lacked a sufficient sophistication to recognize what they do not know, which limited their ability to appreciate the historical importance of the document. This trend supports the findings of other researchers who all argue that historical awareness is a continual process in which students are confronted with a document, struggle to understand it, search for more information, confront the document again or a similar document and continue a cyclical approach to research.[23] While several students mentioned a new desire to learn about different perspectives from these time periods, because of my obvious need to teach other units, I did not pursue these opportunities.

What could we learn through studies that focus on the relationship between prior knowledge and students' abilities in historical thinking, especially looking at this cyclical process of learning? Specifically, I used the documents as a culmination to the three units. I think it would be an interesting comparison if these strategies were used as an introduction to a unit or as an activity in the midst of a unit that would explore the cyclical nature of research and historical understanding, specifically significance. Second, I only used the strategies three times over the course of one semester and saw improvement. Further longitudinal studies would indicate how much more improvement could be seen over an entire course or even over multiple courses.

Because the web was actually included as the introduction to two other important instructional strategies, it is important to remember that much of the evidence generated in the larger study indicated the strength of the interrelated quality of the strategies. Students became much more conscientious in completing their webs after they recognized their usefulness during the Socratic Seminar and in writing the historical essays. If the web was the only strategy utilized, I have significant doubts whether I would have seen the same amount of growth in their motivation and ability. The web introduced them to the selection of important information and the author's point of view, the seminar allowed us to consider as a class the perspective of the author and grapple with different interpretations, and finally the essay created an opportunity for them to experience the responsibility of telling a woman's story as accurately as possible. In addition to the blending of these three instructional strategies, the three aspects of historical thinking put forth by Grant were also highly interrelated. In order to appreciate the historical significance of the author of the document, the students also needed to empathize (historical empathy) with her and appreciate their responsibility in interpreting her story (historical knowledge). This point was made clear when my students said they began to consider what the author would want them to select and include on their webs. Most significantly, it was the consistent use of the strategies and focus on document analysis that became the key factors in the growth the students experienced. By involving the students in a consistent use of instructional strategies that led to deeper thinking about the historical documents, they were liberated from the mechanics of the strategies to a deeper consideration of the document. Throughout the study, students said that each attempt at the web, seminar, and essay "got easier." For example, they talked less about the difficulty of making the web and more about selecting information. I feel their metacognition journals also played a significant role in increasing the sophistication with which they understood the task being asked of them and their ability to discuss their levels of thinking. I would be curious to see what additional studies might reveal about the role of metacognition and historical thinking skills as well as further research into these and other strategies to see if they could work equally well. In summary, we need to continue to conduct research studies focusing on this complex relationship between teachers, students, strategies and content, and how they influence students' historical thinking.

My students said, "This was the hardest, but coolest thing we did all year" (Eric), and "I think I learned more doing this than anything else" (Zach). They came to these conclusions because they became

invested in the personal story of a woman living during the time they were studying. Appreciating the impact of wars, leaders, policies and economics upon these women was what made history literally "come alive" for them. Whitney said during our post-semester discussion, "I might not remember all the facts about these time periods, but I'll never forget these women's stories." Besides being personally connected to the women, my students experienced the responsibility of telling someone's story, and the complex analysis, careful consideration and precise writing involved. Their demonstrated interest in the stories of these women has important implications as we consider the role of social history, especially in relation to political and economic history. My study suggests that social history, especially personal accounts, enhance interest and engagement of students with the major political and economic events they are studying.

In regard to the three areas of historical thinking I explored, the students understood the interpretive nature of history because they experienced it themselves; they appreciated the historical significance of the life of a historical figure and what they learned about a historical period from their story; and they empathized with the author of the document when they realized that historical events influenced people on a very personal level. The consistent use of these three strategies allowed the students to move beyond the mechanics of the activity (i.e., web, seminar or essay) and begin to focus on the complex task of interpreting the document itself. The web provided a mental scaffolding they could adapt to each document, which encouraged them to read a primary source in a new way. They improved with practice and found great meaning in reading primary sources. Learning to consider the author's point of view, distinguish between significant and insignificant information and evaluate the credibility of sources are all important skills for citizens of a democracy. In brief, my students experienced the complexity and excitement of history, which will serve them and our republic well.

## NOTES

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