On the cusp of his December 1859 execution for treason, murder, and inciting a slave rebellion, John Brown handed a note to his guard which read, “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land can never be purged away but with blood.” Although the institution of slavery was purged in the crucible of the American Civil War, John Brown’s determination to expose and end chattel slavery still resonates. The multiple legacies of slavery and questions about the efficacy of violence as a tool for change in a democratic society continually bring historians and teachers back to the complicated life of John Brown. When students consider Brown’s contributions to the American narrative, lines between advocacy and criminality, contrasts between intensity and obsession, and differences between democratic ideals and harsh reality are brought to the surface. To this day, artists, authors, historians, political activists, and creators of popular culture maintain a fascination with the antebellum rights-warrior and his death.

This continuing interest in John Brown presents a great teaching opportunity. Not only can we help to situate John Brown within the context of his era, but we can explore how historical interpretations of the man and his actions have changed over time. The lesson I describe in this article asks students to consider Brown’s biography, multiple artistic representations of the abolitionist, as well as historical and contemporary viewpoints in order to develop an evidence-based interpretation of how this controversial historical figure should be commemorated. Students conduct an analysis of the diverse, and often conflicting, historical sources, and then apply their interpretations to the development of a historical marker that would be placed at the Harper’s Ferry National Historical Park. In this sense, Brown provides a unique opportunity for students to examine a figure whose actions, and their attendant meanings, tell us as much about antebellum America and the origins of the Civil War as they do about our own time.

**The Bigger Picture**

Challenging students to develop an interpretation of John Brown ties into my broader philosophy about history instruction. Research on history education, going back nearly a century, indicates that few students retain, understand, or enjoy their school experiences with history (1). This dismal track record stems from a teaching method that relies primarily on the memorization of names and dates. To limit the study and assessment of history to a student’s ability to regurgitate these facts hides the true nature of the discipline. History, at its core, is the study of questions and the analysis of evidence in an effort to develop and defend thoughtful responses. For students to truly be engaged with the past, they must be taught thinking skills that mirror those employed by historians.

Recent research suggests that students are more capable of evaluating historical sources, using them to develop an interpretation, and articulating their interpretations in a variety of formats. When doing so, students...
become powerful thinkers rather than consumers of a predetermined narrative path (2).

Asking questions about causality, chronology, continuity and change over time, multiple perspectives, contingency, empathy, significance, and motivation enable students to use the substantive information to address essential historical issues. In addition, students must be taught to approach historical sources with the understanding that they are repositories of information that reflect a particular temporal, geographic, and socioeconomic perspective. Analyzing a variety of historical sources—be they diaries, artifacts, music, images, or monographs—enables students to scrutinize the remnants of the past and apply this evidence to the task at hand. Employing these historical thinking skills in a classroom setting empowers students to use the names, dates, and events to develop, revise, and defend evidence-based interpretations of the questions that drive the study of history (3).

Given the path illuminated in the scholarship and my own experiences with teaching history to high school students for eighteen years, I planned the John Brown lesson with an emphasis on source work and student development of evidence-based explanations focused on a key historical question. At the conclusion of the lesson, my students are asked to determine how John Brown and his life should be commemorated. Engaging in many, though not all, of the considerations involved in public history, my students set out to interpret Brown’s life for a twenty-first century audience. To do so, they must get to know the individual, his actions, and how Brown was seen by both his contemporaries and historians from his time to the present.

Background

Born in the first year of the nineteenth century to a devoutly Calvinist family, John Brown credits witnessing a slave being beaten with a shovel as the origin of his devotion to the anti-slavery cause. Unlike most of the abolitionists that arose in the 1810s, Brown was dedicated to both the abolition of chattel slavery and racial equality. This commitment was exemplified in his 1838 decision to escort a free black to sit in his family pew. This bold act led to his family’s expulsion from the church. In a fruitless attempt to become economically solvent, Brown moved to Springfield, Massachusetts in 1846 to develop his wool business. In Springfield, Brown befriended, lived among, and attended church alongside African Americans. Brown’s sincere empathy for the plight of the slave was reflected in a letter written by abolitionist Frederick Douglass after meeting Brown. Douglass, who made a trip to Springfield expressly to meet Brown, stated that Brown was “in sympathy, a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery.” During this meeting, Brown revealed what he called his “Subterranean Pass Way.” Using the Appalachian Mountains as a base, this plan envisioned a rebellion that would arm slaves, encourage their revolt, and direct people northward to freedom. It was in Springfield where Brown first revealed the elements of what would become the final act of his life: a raid on the South to promote a slave rebellion.

In 1849, Brown moved his family to North Elba, New York to live on a communal farm created by abolitionist Gerrit Smith (Figure 2). Living with black families was a clear indication of Brown’s commitment to a biracial society. In 1851, reacting to the Fugitive Slave provisions of the Compromise of 1850, Brown returned to Springfield and established the League of Gileadites. Dedicated to protecting escaped slaves from slave catchers, the League was a concrete expression of Brown’s visceral distaste for federal complicity with the institution of slavery. Brown vehemently expressed his passion for equality in May of 1858, when he presented his “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States” to an anti-slavery convention in Ontario, Canada. Essentially a new constitution for a slavery-free United States, the document stated that:

Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion—the only conditions of which are perpetual imprisonment and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination—in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence:

Therefore, we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, [The Dred Scott Decisions] are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions (4).

Figure 2. In 1848, John Brown learned of abolitionist Gerrit Smith’s offer of free land to blacks in the Adirondacks. The next year, Brown moved his family to North Elba, New York to join this experiment. Though he soon left for “Bloody” Kansas, he considered North Elba his home and asked to be buried there. In 1935, the John Brown Memorial Association dedicated this statue, designed by Joseph P. Pollia, just north of the gravesite, now part of the John Brown Farm State Historic Site: <http://nysparks.state.ny.us/historic-sites/29/details.aspx> (Courtesy of photographer David Blakie, <http://davidblakie.ca/>)
This was a clear statement of Brown’s opposition to slavery and his dedication to equality. Yet for Brown, it was not words, but actions, that seared his name into the pantheon of American history. Speaking to the community of former slaves in Canada, Brown announced his plan to invade the American South and foment a slave rebellion using the mountains of western Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama to provide cover for his uprising. It would be this uprising that occupied much of his travel, speaking, and fundraising between 1858 and his death in 1859.

Brown’s first overt public action took place in May of 1856. In Kansas, Brown led a group of men on a raid that killed five pro-slavery men along the Pottawatomie Creek. Though Brown claimed not to have participated in the actual murders, the brutality of the act has come to symbolize the violence that struck Kansas territory as a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Violence as a tool for change was again employed by Brown in 1858 in Missouri. Brown entered Vernon County, just across the Kansas border, and attacked several proslavery farmers, stole horses and wagons, and secured the freedom of eleven enslaved persons. His raid led to the deaths of several farmers, and consequently a bounty of $250 was placed on his head by President James Buchanan and his name was splashed over newspapers across the nation. After traveling more than a thousand miles over eighty-plus days, Brown delivered the newly liberated former-slaves into the hands of Canada and freedom.

Secretly funded by six abolitionists from Massachusetts, armed with thousands of pikes purchased in Connecticut, driven by his deep disdain for slavery, and supported by twenty-one other men, Brown headed to western Maryland to reconnoiter for his final attempt to foment a rebellion aimed at destroying the institution of slavery. The raid on the federal arsenal in Harper’s Ferry, Virginia was initiated on the evening of October 16, 1859. In what quickly developed into a rout, more than half of Brown’s followers were killed and the remaining eight, including Brown, were captured the following day. Indicted, found guilty, and sentenced to die, John Brown was hanged in Charlestown, Virginia on December 2, 1859.

Teaching the Lesson
The lesson begins with students examining a series of images depicting John Brown (the full lesson plan can be found online at <http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/oahmagazine>). Students are asked to describe the emotions each image evokes, identify elements of the piece that help to communicate the artist’s perspective, and describe the individual in the image. Be it a graphic novel, statuary, Currier and Ives prints, New Deal–sponsored murals, the art of Jacob Lawrence, or daguerreotypes, John Brown’s visual depictions vary in subtle and not so subtle ways. My students are immediately attracted to both the images and the overt discrepancies in how Brown appears and is depicted. Students often describe Brown as a crazy old man, a savior, or a dedicated abolitionist. They are fascinated with how Brown looks in the photographic images as well as how various artists have presented him. Of particular interest is the evolution of the apocryphal image of Brown kissing a slave child on the steps of the Charlestown jail. Its origin appears to be a John Greenleaf Whittier Poem, “Brown of Osawatomie,” published in the New York Independent on December 22, 1859, three weeks after Brown’s execution. The poet’s first three stanzas eloquently describe Brown’s final act:
The notion of Brown consecrating his sacrifice for slaves with a kiss to the cheek of a slave child found visual form in the 1860s painting, *John Brown on His Way to Execution* by Louis Ransom. It was further popularized by an 1863 Currier and Ives colored lithograph entitled *John Brown*, and subtitled *Meeting the slave-mother and her child on the steps of Charleston jail on his way to execution*, Thomas Noble’s *John Brown’s Blessing* appeared in 1867, a redrawn Currier and Ives, *John Brown—The Martyr* debuted in 1870. Finally, in 1884, Thomas Hovenden painted his memorialization of the mythical kiss in his *Last Moments of John Brown* (See cover image) (7). This introductory element of the lesson fertilizes the pedagogical ground for growing a deep and meaningful investigation of Brown.

A one-page biographical reading, assigned for homework, is used to structure class discussion of Brown’s upbringing, his early efforts to address slavery in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the events leading up to his attack on the federal arsenal in Harper’s Ferry. Emphasis is drawn to Brown’s religious beliefs, his role in “Bleeding Kansas,” his raid into Missouri, and finally the ill-fated Harper’s Ferry Raid. To firmly place Brown’s actions within the growing sectional mentality of the 1850s, I discuss with students the various sectional reactions to Brown’s failed raid. With the contrasting images of Brown fresh in their minds, I inform students that it is their task to determine how Brown should be memorialized historically.

To deepen their analysis of Brown, students are assigned one of several readings. Selected to represent contrasting interpretations of the man and his actions, these readings are intended to complicate students’ investigation. I traditionally select six sources from the list of “Further Readings” located at the end of the article, but I have provided all of the potential sources on the online version of the lesson materials. Historiographically, the discussion of Brown has evolved from the hero-worship of James Redpath and Oswald Garrison Villard to critical analysis of his mental state as found in the work of Bruce Catton and James C. Malin.

Students are organized so that all of the six sources are represented within a group. Each student then presents the interpretation of John Brown expounded by their source. Next, to assist students in better understanding each perspective, I identify some relevant background information of the various authors and the time period in which they wrote. It is important to ensure that students consider authorship, context, and subtext as they derive information from a historical source. By confronting the milieu in which Malcolm X spoke about Brown, or how personal biography impacts Villard’s telling of the Brown story, students are forced to consider the sources not as words, but as a perspective informed by and reflecting the social, cultural, economic, and political background of the author and the time period of its construction. Exposing the subtext of each source illuminates for students how John Brown has been interpreted differently and empowers them to develop their own evidence-based interpretations of the past.

Since I teach a forty-five minute class period, my lesson usually breaks in the midst of students sharing the evidence provided by their sources. At times, I will ask students, as homework between day one and two of the lesson, to consult one Northern and one Southern editorial found at <http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py>. These articles, and the context and subtext that influence their perspectives, help complicate, but also deepen, our final discussion on how to commemorate John Brown.

After sharing and taking notes, students are asked to consider how they feel John Brown and his actions should be commemorated. Small group discussions of the topic eventually become a large group debate. It is key to this phase of the lesson that students base their interpretations on the evidence they have confronted. Issues of authorship and context add to our discussion about what John Brown means to the telling of American history and how his efforts should be memorialized.

At the conclusion of the lesson, students are asked to apply the evidence they have examined to one of two assessments. The first option is to complete a historical marker that is to be placed at the entrance of the Harper’s Ferry National Historic Park. The second is to select five items that would be displayed in the museum at the same park, explain why they were selected, and how these items help to describe John Brown and account for his actions. These assessments place students in a position where they must adhere to the basic historical facts in order to develop and defend an interpretation of the choice they made about commemorating John Brown. Either iteration of the assessment requires students to identify what historical sources informed their decisions and how these sources influenced their choices.

**Reflections and Conclusions**

Students have a hard time wrapping their minds around John Brown. Go figure, so do historians. Brown has been the subject of hundreds of books, articles, documentaries, and other forms of historical interpretation. My students, just as historians, are drawn into the complexities of Brown’s personality and the actions he takes over the course of his life.

When crafting their interpretations for the historical marker, students tend to run in one of three directions. A large number take a middle of the road approach. After examining the multiple images and textual viewpoints of Brown, they stick to what they see as the pertinent facts. Gone are incendiary adjectives or overt ideological typecasting of Brown and his actions. In many ways, their markers are reminiscent of those produced by the National Park Service for many historical figures and events. The second third stress Brown’s actions in both Missouri and Harper’s Ferry, but do not address his beliefs. They reflect in their analysis that they are unwilling or unable to determine if he was crazy, obsessively focused, or simply devoted to his cause. The final third interpret and represent Brown as a madman whose actions intentionally set the nation barreling towards civil discord.

What strikes me about this lesson is that students come to see history as alive and interpretive, rather than inert and handed down from some central authoritative body. Most instruments that measure student achievement in history would simply ask students to select the response in a multiple choice question that correctly identifies the impact of Brown’s actions. This is achieved within the first five minutes of my lesson. Instead, it is the pastness of Brown that captures their interest and generates in-depth analysis, far beyond a discussion that establishes the basis for an answer to a multiple-choice question. The power and depth of the discussion generated about Brown has been the impetus for me to apply this structure to other historical figures and events. Individuals such as Nat Turner, Daniel Shays, or Eugene Debs and events such as the Haymarket Affair, Busing in Boston, or the Tet Offensive become ripe for deep historical investigation once I realized that my students could do so. The depth of connection my students make with these watershed events and transitional figures far outweighs the time it takes to plan or execute such investigations.

At the same time, the power of images to quickly connect students to a topic is also readily evident when I teach this lesson. The images
empower students to become more critical in their analysis of the textual sources they are asked to read. Because the images are so stark, both in contrast to one another as well as individually, students look for similar differences within the text. This transfer of critical reading from the more comfortable image analysis to the more difficult text is a key ingredient for students as they evolve their abilities to think historically. When students are taught to be aware that historical sources are not simply repositories of information, but instead vehicles for communicating an author’s perspective on an individual, event, or historical idea, they are enabled to begin crossing the bridge from the “unnatural act of thinking historically” towards a mindset more parallel to that employed by historians.

Ultimately, what my students enjoy is the opportunity to examine the past rather than having it examined for them. The occasion to apply historical thinking skills to determine how to commemorate the life and actions of one of the most divisive figures in American History empowers students to examine multiple sources of historical evidence, develop, revise, and defend evidence-based interpretations, and grapple with key questions of the past. Just as John Brown taught us that challenging the norms of American society is a difficult endeavor, so too is challenging the manner in which we approach teaching history.

Further Readings:

Endnotes

Bruce A. Lesh has taught U.S history and government for eighteen years at Franklin High School in Reisterstown, Maryland. Past president of the Maryland Council for the Social Studies and current vice-chair of the National Council for History Education, Bruce has published teaching units through the Center for Learning, articles in the OAH Magazine of History, and book reviews in The History Teacher. In 2008, the Organization of American Historians awarded Lesh the Tachau Teacher of the Year for his outstanding contributions to precollege history education. Lesh is the author of “Why Won’t You Just Tell US the Answer”: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7–12 (Stenhouse, 2011).

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