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Students become historians in social studies classes

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The definitions of student and historian are coming together in a few social studies classes in the Newberry County School District.

A student is anyone who studies, investigates or examines thoughtfully while a historian is an expert or student studying a particular period, geographical region or social phenomenon.



Students as historians — it's a novel idea brought to life by three Newberry County School District teachers who have termed the strategy Doc Walks.

Lacey Long from Newberry Middle School and Jeffrey Eargle and Ali Koch from Mid-Carolina High School brainstormed together about the newest teaching strategy in which primary sources are interactively woven into their courses. Students are doing what historians do — finding their own answers and thinking for themselves, according to Long.



“Doc Walks is an original strategy,” Long said. “A tiny idea that evolved.”

Koch pointed out the textbook is not just thrown to the side.

“Textbooks are more of a reference than a primary teaching source,” she said. “It has one perspective of an author opposed to a variety of sources.”

Primary sources is a growing trend in education and continues to grow nationally. Eargle, Koch and Long are eagerly spreading the word and want people to see the positive impact it is having. They certainly are seeing a positive

impact as they have noticed the students are more into the class and not falling asleep, to put it bluntly.

The trio noted their principals — Lynn Cary and Kelly Farmer — have been extra supportive of the additional time they have put towards this as well as the conferences they attend.

The teachers have been working as a team for more than a year to develop something unique and engaging for the kids. They do not want to just keep it inside Newberry County and are eager to share their strategy with districts across the state. They also want to expose Doc Walks nationally and get other teachers on board to use this interactive teaching method.

The trio has gone to six different conferences, starting in February, and they still are attending conferences and spreading the word about using primary sources in their social studies classrooms. However, they agree any teacher of any subject should be able to use primary source and point to literature as one example.

The teachers bring in first hand account documents which can be anything from photographs and visual images to data and reports. This is an interactive learning system designed to get the students thinking for themselves as well as asking questions.

However, the teachers do not just hand out the documents and tell the students to go at it.

The teachers teach them how to look at a document and study it and they go from station to station helping out as needed but being careful not to spoon feed the answers. The students all have a starting station and then move chronologically, walking along and analyzing and answering questions. Another aspect of this strategy is that one group can start at the last document and move backwards while another group starts in the middle.

In addition to moving from station to station, the group collectively writes down their thoughts and questions in response to the previous group's thoughts. Students also build their vocabulary by coming across words they normally would not come across, according to Koch.

“You get visual, kinesthetic, auditory — all learners,” Koch said, adding students have to think. “It’s a very student centered lesson.”

As for the teachers, they must work hard as well.

“(Teachers) have to do research to find what’s suitable for kids to reach and achieve,” Koch said. “You have to be thoughtful about what you find.”

The teachers do indeed dedicate a lot of time and, as Koch and Long both pointed out, they have to find the right excerpts and not get documents from one

side or one point of view. They pointed out it's important to get more than one perspective.

The teachers added the sacrifice is worth it for the end result and that's to see the students enjoying learning.

Teachers also have to be willing to change because it is different from the typical classroom lecture.

Koch introduced her ninth-grade geography class to Doc Walks and, after a few stations, the students seemed to grasp the concept or at least begin to understand the process.

Trimone Hall said the project is "challenging" but this isn't the first time he's worked with primary sources.

When Hall was in Robert Flint's social studies class in eighth grade at Mid-Carolina Middle School, he worked with documents and drawings and essentially did the same sort of thing.

This is Shekia Camack's first time working with primary sources and she enjoys it.

"I liked it because you have to communicate and you have to read and work with others," Camack said.

Both high school freshmen agree it was different and some documents proved more challenging than others but they enjoyed it and look forward to working with documents and sources in the future.

Koch teaches ninth-grade geography, 12th-grade economics and advanced placement (AP) human geography. Eargle teaches U.S. history for AP, honors and college prep and a Holocaust course. Long teaches seventh- and eighth-grade South Carolina and world history.

The teachers are grateful for support and contributions from the late Dr. Jennifer Wilson and Mid-Carolina High teacher Breana Amick.