

Bottleneck Lesson Plan

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Transformative Learning Collegium (TLC), May 2018**

Discipline and Course title: History; H270 What Is History?

Briefly outline your answers to the following:

1. The bottleneck—What are students unable to do?

Students who read historical works don't understand the difference between interpretation and evidence. They assume that the interpretation is just more information (evidence), and they can't see that the historian has created an interpretation (or thesis statement, or main claim, or argument) that uses the evidence (sources, facts, information) to support the claim. They can't see the hierarchy—that one necessarily comes before the other (interpretation then evidence) and that one is superior to the other (interpretation marshals the evidence). They also can't see the necessary relationship between interpretation and evidence—that an interpretation without supporting evidence fails to persuade, and that the evidence is there because and only because it supports the interpretation.

2. Mental Action—What mental actions does the expert perform to get past the bottleneck?

Historians can read a piece of historical writing and quickly find the argument and/or interpretation. We know where to look (the introduction of the introduction). We know the words and catchphrases to look for (“this study will...”; “[the topic] helps us to understand...”). We zero in on when and how historians argue *for* something (make their interpretation of the past) by arguing *against* other historians' interpretations (by listing earlier works; “the state of the field”).

3. Model the thinking—What analogy will you use to model these mental actions?

I am hoping enough students are familiar with the scientific method, or at least the folk version of it. That with an experiment, you come up with a question or hypothesis, then test the hypothesis through an experiment to generate data that can be analyzed to determine the strength of the hypothesis. As in, create a hypothesis about how two compounds will react when mixed. With a science experiment, the hypothesis is supposed to be informed by knowledge about compounds, molecules, etc. But the hypothesis attempts to predict change in the future. For historians, the experiment has already been run—by people living their lives in the past. We don't predict the outcome because we know the outcome. What we need to do is to explain how and why the outcome took place. Compounds (people) interacted in the past and generated data (our knowledge of past events). To create a hypothesis (interpretation) of the past experiment, we need knowledge to inform it: e.g., the works of other historians who came before us writing about the same or similar events. We don't run the experiment but we

collect data from the experiment in the form of primary sources. We don't need to predict the outcome but we instead explain why the outcome took place.

4. Practice and Feedback—How will the students practice these mental actions? How will they receive feedback to make improvements?

Students will be given an introduction to an academic article that very clearly articulates its interpretation and very clearly says something about the evidence it will use to support its interpretation. Students will be asked to highlight where the argument is, where a statement about the evidence is, and to noting the differences between the two. In noting the differences, students will be asked to analyze how clearly the author explained her argument (e.g., by showing the differences between their explanation and other historians' explanations) and by how clearly they explained the use of evidence to support that argument.

5. Motivation—What will I do to hold students accountable and disrupt ritual ways of learning?

6. Assessment—How will I assess student mastery of the mental actions?

I will do #4 above early in the semester and then later replicate the lesson with another academic article. I will then have a post-post-test, because students have to come up with an original interpretation for the topic of their choosing by the end of the semester. My hope is that this earlier exercise will make their final projects more precise.

7. How will you share what you learned?

I will present my results to the TLC and record them for a Decoding the Disciplines YouTube video.