

AI and Historical Perspective

Why?

In this lesson, students use the brainstorming ability of generative AI to look into what people thought, believed, and understood at the time of a historical event or development. This lesson builds critical thinking, empathetic understanding, and analytical skills that are applicable across a broad range of subjects. As students explore historical perspectives and contexts, they enhance their ability to evaluate sources, understand diverse viewpoints, and appreciate the complexity of human experiences, which are key competencies in navigating the modern world's informational landscape. Moreover, the emphasis on inquiry-based learning and creative expression prepares students for interdisciplinary problem-solving, equipping them with the tools to critically analyze and synthesize information in various academic and real-life scenarios.

Materials Needed

Student access to generative AI, such as ChatGPT

Time needed

Approximately 30 - 60 minutes

Objectives

- Students will be able to evaluate the impact of historical context on the actions, decisions, and viewpoints of individuals and groups in the past.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast historical perspectives with contemporary viewpoints to understand changes in societal norms and values.
- Students will be able to formulate thoughtful, open-ended questions that probe into the historical context and perspectives related to specific events or actions.
- Students will be able to engage in empathetic reasoning to understand the motivations and circumstances of people from different historical contexts.

Key Concepts & Vocabulary

Historical Context: The social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions that shaped people's lives and actions in the past.

Primary Source: Original documents, objects, or artifacts from a particular period that provide firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning a historical topic.

Secondary Source: Works that interpret, analyze, or critique primary sources, often written by historians or scholars, providing a secondhand account of historical events.

Cultural Norms: The shared expectations and rules that guide behavior of people within social groups, often taken for granted.

Artifact: An object made by a human being, typically of cultural or historical interest.

Empathy: The ability to understand and share the feelings of another, which is crucial in understanding historical perspectives.

Lesson

This lesson can be used when studying a historical event reveals actions that seem

unusual by modern standards. This could happen in any class, since most classes study historical events. Some examples:

Social Studies - Historical events, wars, political disputes, economic changes, cultural movements

Language Arts - Historical literature, author's context, analysis of historical speeches, mythology and folklore

Science - Scientific discoveries, revolutions, and theories; environmental science; medical history

Mathematics - Development of mathematical concepts, biographies of key figures, mathematics in ancient civilizations, mathematics and navigation

Arts - Artistic movements, musical genres

See example at end of lesson plan.

Lesson sequence

Step 1: Identifying the Inquiry Focus

Begin by acknowledging an intriguing aspect of a historical event. Use this as a springboard to highlight the importance of context, perspectives, and the evolving nature of societal norms and beliefs.

Frame the class's objective: to explore and understand the beliefs, perspectives, or realities of the time that led to the actions or interpretations in question.

Step 2: Contextual Background

Cover an overview of the event or person in question, ensuring students have a foundational understanding of the key facts, figures, and prevailing conditions of the time. This context is crucial for informed inquiry.

Step 3: Formulating Inquiry Questions

Guide the class in formulating thoughtful, open-ended questions that address historical actions or interpretations under scrutiny. Emphasize questions that seek to uncover the perspectives, beliefs, and knowledge of the time. (For example, "why would the president have vetoed the bill?")

Encourage students to consider different angles, such as societal norms, political motivations, economic factors, or cultural beliefs.

Step 4: Research and Exploration with ChatGPT

Divide the class into small groups or pairs.

Optionally, assign each group or pair a different aspect of the event. (For example, have different groups focus on the actions of different people or groups, or have groups focus on the causes or effects of a particular event.)

Demonstrate the process of posing a question to ChatGPT to elicit the historical background sought for this exploration. (Example prompt: Type a summary of the historical event, potentially including primary source quotes, and then include the question, "**What beliefs, perspectives, or realities at the time would make that a sensible action?**")

Facilitate an interactive session where students use this or similar prompts with

ChatGPT, guiding them to read and analyze the responses and consider follow-up inquiries as needed for deeper understanding.
Encourage students to note interesting or unexpected insights and any questions that arise from the interaction.

Step 5: Sharing and Discussion

Reconvene as a whole class and invite groups / pairs to share their findings.
Facilitate a discussion that connects these insights back to the basic overview of the topic from earlier in the class period.
Encourage students to reflect on how the context and perspectives of the time explain the historical actions or interpretations, and discuss any parallels or contrasts with modern-day beliefs and values.

Step 6: Reflection and Closure

Highlight the skills they've practiced, such as critical questioning, empathy in understanding historical contexts, and synthesizing information from different sources, and discuss how these skills are valuable beyond the classroom.
Conclude the lesson with a reflective discussion. See several possible whole-class discussion questions below.

Discussion Questions

- How did the historical context influence the decisions and actions of people during the period we studied?
- What similarities and differences can you identify between the beliefs and values of the time period we studied and those of today?
- How might understanding the historical perspectives we discussed today change our view of the event or actions in question?
- Were there any perspectives or beliefs from the time period that surprised you? Why?
- How do you think the people living during this time period would view our current world and its values?
- Why is it important to consider multiple perspectives when studying history?
- How can the biases in historical sources impact our understanding of past events?
- In what ways did the process of formulating questions and seeking answers deepen your understanding of the historical topic?
- How can we apply the critical thinking skills we used today to other areas of study or life situations?
- If you could ask someone from the time period we studied one question, what would it be and why?

Supplemental Activity Ideas

“Talk” with a Historical Figure: Use generative AI, such as ChatGPT, to have a conversation with a historical figure related to the exploration in the lesson. Prompt the AI with: “We would like to have a conversation with you as if you are ____ [historical

figure's name, or inanimate object related to the topic]. Only respond with the understanding that the person would have during their lifetime. Do your best to answer with the historical perspective of the time." Ask the "historical figure" a series of questions. Get questions from students to type into the chat.

Historical Diary Entry: Students write a diary entry from the perspective of a historical figure related to the topic studied for the class period. Knowing some of the contemporary realities of the time, students will be better equipped to react to the event as if in the time period.

Create a Virtual "Museum": Have students create presentations in which they find photos of artifacts or other objects related to the historical topic. Students then describe the subjects of the photos in short paragraphs representing interpretive plaques. Student presentations become exhibits in a virtual "museum" as if they were curating an exhibit about the topic. Discuss artifacts, artworks, or exhibits that relate to the themes and perspectives explored in class.

Role-playing Game: Design a role-playing game where students must make decisions based on the historical context and perspectives they've studied. This interactive approach can make historical dilemmas and decisions more relatable.

Example ChatGPT Conversation #1

User: In relation to the Lewis & Clark expedition, President Jefferson wrote to Lewis in his letter of instructions, "Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy, to be entered distinctly & intelligibly for others as well as yourself." Related to that, Lewis wrote, "we have encouraged our men to keep journals, and seven of them do so..."

What beliefs, perspectives, or realities at the time would make that a significant part of the expedition?

ChatGPT: Using the Lewis and Clark expedition as an example provides a rich context to explore historical understanding, beliefs, perspectives, and the importance of documentation during that era. Let's break this down:

1. The Value of Knowledge and Exploration

- * Enlightenment Ideals: The late 18th and early 19th centuries were heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals, which emphasized reason, scientific inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge. Jefferson's instructions reflect this value on meticulous observation and documentation, aiming to expand the scientific and geographical understanding of the newly acquired territories.
- * Manifest Destiny: Although the term wasn't coined until later, the belief in the United States' destiny to expand westward was already taking root. Documenting the expedition was crucial for asserting American claims and facilitating future settlement and exploration.

2. Scientific Inquiry and Documentation

- * Natural History: There was a burgeoning interest in cataloging and understanding the natural world, influenced by figures like Carl Linnaeus. The expedition's detailed records contributed significantly to the knowledge of North American flora and fauna.
- * Cartography: Accurate maps were essential for navigation, territorial claims, and future expeditions. The expedition's detailed maps and geographical observations were invaluable for these purposes.

3. Cultural and Ethnographic Considerations

- * Encounters with Indigenous Peoples: The expedition involved numerous encounters with Native American tribes. The detailed observations in the journals provide insights into the diverse cultures, languages, and societies of the Indigenous peoples at the time, albeit from the expedition members' perspectives.
- * Diplomacy and Trade: Understanding the social and political landscapes of the various indigenous nations was crucial for the success of the expedition and future American interactions, including trade and treaty negotiations.

4. Personal and Collective Narratives

- * Individual Perspectives: Encouraging multiple members of the expedition to keep journals ensured a diversity of perspectives and detailed accounts of daily life, challenges, and discoveries during the journey.
- * Historical Record: These journals provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted historical record, preserving personal experiences and observations that would have been lost with oral accounts alone.

Example ChatGPT Conversation #2

User: About the Theory of Relativity, Einstein devised radical new ideas about time and space. He came to the startling conclusion that the measured length of an object travelling at high speeds (greater than about one percent of the speed of light) is shorter than the same object measured at rest. **What beliefs, perspectives, or realities at the time would make that so startling?** (Please write your answers at the understanding level of a 12-year-old.)

ChatGPT: Einstein's Theory of Relativity was super surprising for a few reasons, especially when he talked about how things moving really fast can seem shorter than when they're not moving:

Old School Physics: Before Einstein, everyone followed Newton's rules, which said space and time were like a giant, unchanging grid. So, the idea that an object could actually shrink when it speeds up was totally weird because everyone thought objects stayed the same size all the time.

Time and Space: People used to think time ticked away the same for everyone and that space was just... space. Einstein said that time could slow down and things could get shorter if they were moving super fast, which sounded like something out of a sci-fi story!

Light Speed: Einstein also said that light always travels at the same speed, no matter what. Before him, people thought if you ran really fast and turned on a flashlight, the light would go faster because you were adding your speed to it. But Einstein said that's not how it works.

Brain-Bending Ideas: These new ideas weren't just about science; they made people think differently about everything, like what "now" really means, and how we understand the world. It was like learning the rules to a game and then finding out those rules didn't apply if you played the game super fast.

Seeing is Believing: Back then, they didn't have the tools to test if things really got shorter at high speeds, so people had to take Einstein's word for it, which was a big ask because it was such a strange idea.

So, Einstein's theories were kind of like saying you could turn into a pancake if you rode your bike too fast, which is why everyone was so shocked!