

Organizing My Thoughts: Using the Action Cycle to Facilitate a Deep Understanding of History (and Beyond!)

by Robert W. Gaskins, Ph.D.

I have always found history fascinating. As a boy, I used to spend hours poring over books on everything from the Mayan Empire to the Civil War and the cave dwellings at Mesa Verde. Each photograph, picture, diagram, and map in those texts was a treasure to be analyzed in detail time and again. A family trip to a historical site was like a pilgrimage to a sacred place.

Getting Excited About History

Thus, you can imagine my excitement when the first lesson I was asked to prepare as a young teaching assistant was about the Civil War. However, to my surprise, it was immediately apparent that the students did not share my enthusiasm for history. At the time, I did not know that their mix of indifference and distaste was quite consistent with the finding of years of research on student perceptions of history instruction. What I did know is that I was determined to figure out how to help the students not only recognize the joy of history but also understand it deeply while meaningfully connecting it to the rest of their lives.

A key element of helping students get excited about history is the use of an inquiry-based approach to instruction. (See my column in the Winter 2014 issue of the Benchmark Magazine for a discussion of inquiry-based instruction.) This approach also encourages a deep exploration of historical ideas. However, more than just inquiry is needed to truly provide students with the tools to develop a deep understanding of content that can also transfer to other areas of their lives.

Recognizing Patterns and Establishing Frameworks

In considering how to develop deep understanding, it makes sense to examine what distinguishes people with deep understandings of topics and domains (experts) from those with emerging understandings (novices). Without question, experts know more than novices about their areas of concentration. However, the most critical difference between experts and novices is that experts' knowledge is organized around central ideas that structure meaning and facilitate understanding and memory. As an example, accomplished musicians and music aficionados are far more adept at learning, remembering, and analyzing complex compositions than people who do not study music. At the core of this difference is that experts hear music as meaningful patterns structured by frameworks such as scales, modes, chord progressions, time signatures, rhythms, and phrasing, whereas novices are more likely to hear the same music as a series of distinct notes.

Based on insights gained from a comprehensive review of the research literature on expertise, learning theory, comprehension strategies, and motivation, I set out to design a framework that could facilitate students' deep understanding of historical topics and inform their thinking throughout their lives. The question was: What kind of framework would

- work across events, historical figures, and time periods;
- help establish connections and identify patterns over time;

- apply across academic domains as well as to students' everyday decision-making; and
- be simple and familiar enough for students to easily use and remember?



Robb Gaskins

The Action Cycle

The answer at which I arrived is a framework that structures human actions. Essentially, history is the study of the causes and consequences of human actions over time. Consequently, a framework that helps students reflect on the major factors that consistently affect the choices people make as well as the outcomes that derive from those actions can apply to any particular unit of study in history. Beyond that, a framework that applies to human action can facilitate students' understanding of literature, art, music, and the history of discoveries in science and math while facilitating a deeper understanding of others and themselves. Finally, a framework centered on human actions has the advantage of structuring a topic about which students have some familiarity. While students are not experts in human behavior, they deal with it every day.

This was the genesis of a conceptual framework I developed called the Action Cycle. The Action Cycle is based on a few core understandings:

1. Humans take actions to meet their needs. These needs are organized into survival, social, and big picture needs. They are continuously present and can never be met definitively. As such, they provide an unending source of motivation and direction for actions.
2. The specific actions humans take to meet their needs are affected by the context in which the actions take place, with the context consisting of all internal and external variables that comprise the immediate situation.
3. Once an action is taken, it has consequences that affect the people, places, and/or events that constitute the context.
4. Those consequences create a new context for subsequent actions.
5. Each person (or group) has his/her (their) own action cycle that can affect others when they share the same context.

I have collaborated with colleagues to conduct a number of studies on the Action Cycle, and we have found that once students are taught these basic principles by working through familiar examples, they become increasingly adept at using the Action Cycle as a basis for asking questions, making predictions, analyzing scenarios, understanding events, remembering information, and recognizing connections across events.

This spring, Zeffie Spirokostas' 2nd and 3rd graders and I used the Action Cycle to frame our exploration of the settlement of Jamestown. The entire unit was presented as one overarching

The Action Cycle

By Robert W. Gaskins © 2009 Benchmark School

Question: Why did the Jamestown settlement struggle to survive and almost collapse in its early years?

Consequences:

- A high percentage of colonists who came died
- In 1610, the colonists actually abandon the colony & started to return to England

Consequences:
The consequences of an action or event change aspects of the context, which creates a different setting for future actions.

Human Needs:
Human needs are at the root of human action.

Human Needs:

- Survival Needs:** We need to keep our bodies healthy and safe.
- Social Needs:** We need to figure out our identities in the group and feel like we belong.
- Big Picture Needs:** We need to figure out our identities in the universe and feel like we belong.

Context:

Issue:
A small group of English settlers are trying to establish a settlement and make a profit in an unfamiliar setting that was already occupied

Important Features of this Context:

- Salty and dirty water in Jamestown
- Drought (crops suffered, fewer animals to hunt)
- The Powhatans eventually surrounding the fort and shot people who left
- After a while, the Powhatans wouldn't trade food any more
- Added more people to area (meant less food for everyone)

Context:
Physical Features
Human Features
The actions that humans take are shaped by the context in which they occur.

Action:
There are a range of possible actions that can come from a particular context. All actions have consequences.

Action:

- At first, didn't focus as much on planting (or bring enough food)
- Drank salty and dirty water
- Arrogant, didn't treat Powhatans very well, made enemies

Action Taken by Someone Else or a Natural Event

- Leaders fought one another & made a lot of bad decisions
- They chose a poor spot for the settlement (marshy swamp, no fresh water)

mystery comprised of smaller mysteries, each of which could be explored using the Action Cycle. Throughout the unit, we followed the same basic format. I would introduce intriguing and/or counterintuitive information. The students would then reflect on the information and generate questions based on the Action Cycle. We would identify the most essential question given what we knew, make predictions about the answer using the Action Cycle, and then seek resources to help us arrive at an answer. The Action Cycle was used to organize what we had learned before following the same pattern with a new question.

As an example, in the middle of the unit, I shared that of the 105 settlers who landed in May 1607, only 38 were still alive in January 1608. Then, in the winter of 1609-1610, the settlement that had been replenished and resupplied numerous times and stood at somewhere between 220 and 500 inhabitants was reduced to under 100 (some sources report as low as 60). In fact, when two ships arrived from England in May 1610, the colony was in such deplorable condition they decided to abandon it. The survivors were on their way down the river en route to England when they ran into an advance ship for Lord de la Warr. He brought 300 new colonists and an abundance of provisions, and the colony widely recognized today as "the first permanent English settlement in North America" survived by the slimmest of margins.

Based on this information, the students generated many questions before determining that the most essential was: Why did the Jamestown settlement struggle to survive and almost collapse in the early years? We used the Action Cycle as a basis for making predictions and then we read about the early years and organized what we learned using an Action Cycle diagram (see Figure 1 above). This discussion flowed directly into the next big question: Since we know Jamestown became the "first permanent English settlement in North America," what changed so that it ultimately survived? Again, the Action Cycle served as our framework for making predictions and investigating the answer.

It was a foregone conclusion that I was going to have fun studying Jamestown. But, what made me especially happy was that the students in Mrs. Spirokostas' class were actively involved and having fun, too. They were excited to be posing questions, making predictions, and solving problems. History was coming to life and making sense in a new way. The class discussions and student questions demonstrated that they understood Jamestown at quite a deep level. In addition, while this was their first introduction to the Action Cycle, the students were beginning to mention how the Action Cycle could frame events in their own lives. Further still, in a literature unit following Jamestown, the students raised the point that the Action Cycle could help them frame that discussion, too! Such independent transfer is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates that the

students were beginning to take ownership of the framework and recognize how to apply it in new contexts.

Changing the Trajectory of Students' Lives Beyond our Walls

The Action Cycle is an example of how, at Benchmark, we seek not only to implement ideas drawn from current research but also to take those ideas and apply them in novel ways to create something new and exciting that will help our students. But this outcome is not the limit of our aspirations. Through presentations at national and international conferences and publications in the research literature, we endeavor for these innovations to change the trajectory of not only our students' lives but also the lives of students far beyond our walls. At Benchmark, we are passionate about helping all students become confident and strategic thinkers, learners, and problem solvers who meet with success in school and life. We look forward to every opportunity to achieve this goal.