



The Many Jobs of Jean Nicolet: Using Textbook Entries to Critically Analyze Sources in the Elementary School Classroom

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Van Haren

I am a fourth and fifth grade social studies teacher at Pittsville Elementary School, a small, rural school in the state of Wisconsin. I am currently starting my PHD journey at Penn State University. My ultimate goal is to provide elementary teachers with the resources and confidence to teach and advocate for quality history and civics education for our youngest learners. These efforts include creating curriculum that encourages students to engage with primary sources and consider multiple perspectives at the very beginning of their social studies careers. As an elementary school student, I fell in love with archeology, history, and the study of different cultures through books. I am interested in exploring ways classroom teachers can use fiction and nonfiction stories, digital sources, and other media to introduce students to other members of their global communities. I am also interested in helping students create different types of media that allows them to tell their own stories. I want to lead by example. I continue to travel to learn, and document my experiences whether they happen from a recliner or airplane seat. I've traveled and studied in multiple countries on five continents, and am always excited to explore.



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INTRODUCTION

Textbooks provide valuable source material for primary school students studying historical research processes. Fourth graders studied multiple retellings of the experiences of Jean

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Nicolet, a French diplomat, when he landed in Wisconsin in 1634. By studying changes of the same event in multiple textbooks, students developed an understanding of how historical research and scholarship change over time. After reading the most up-to-date information, students were able to identify the flaws in past textbooks and popular artwork depicting the event. Using their new knowledge, students wrote letters and drew reinterpretations of Nicolet's journey that advocated for a broader teaching of the new information.

IN DEFENSE OF TEXTBOOKS

Textbooks often have a notorious reputation among students and history teachers. The groans of students lugging a heavy textbook of dull information around all year are the focus of many jokes. Many teachers have a similar reaction when they think of the lack of perspectives and outdated information in books required to be used by district administration. However, biographies of textbook authors reveal they are often highly qualified scholars and educators. Textbook writers must juggle multiple sets of state standards and design material appropriate for diverse learners (Sternberg, 2017).

In defense of textbook authors, textbooks should never be treated as the only source of infinite knowledge. Textbooks should be analyzed the same as any other source of information. The sooner the school community understands this, the sooner a more effective study of history can begin. The following lesson provides examples of how fourth-grade students used textbooks and research to enhance their knowledge of European explorers' relationships with Indigenous peoples in the 17th-century Fur Trade. Students learned how interpretations of primary sources and how focusing on multiple perspectives could provide unique insights into historical events and people.

THE MANY INTERPRETATIONS OF JEAN NICOLET

Many Wisconsin elementary students learn about Jean Nicolet, one of the first Frenchmen to enter the state. Professional and amateur historians agree that Quebec Governor Samuel de Champlain sent him on his mission. In his book, *The Mission of Jean Nicolet: Uncovering the Story of the 1634 Journey*, Patrick Jung details the common story retold in social studies textbooks. He states, "In 1634, Nicolet arrived in Green Bay believing he had discovered the Northwest Passage, the elusive waterway through North America that would provide a route to Asiatic riches in the Kingdom of Cathay, or China" (Malone et al., 2016, p.1).

He continues, "After traveling hundreds of miles by canoe across Lake Huron and Michigan, Nicolet donned a rich embroidered Chinese robe for the occasion of his arrival, but of course, he did not meet the powerful Mandarins who represented the Ming emperor, he met American Indians" (p. 1).

This story is often reinforced with secondary visual images created hundreds of years after Nicolet's encounter with the Puan Nation, the ancestors of the modern-day Ho-Chunk. The most popular image used in textbooks is the painting *The Landfall of Jean Nicolet in Wisconsin*, completed by E. W. Deming in 1907. A mural by Franz Edward Rohbeck (1907)



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that perpetuates the same myth is still prominently displayed in the Brown County Courthouse in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The paintings feature an elaborately robed Nicolet firing two pistols in the air. Numerous historical markers and statues are also placed in the locations shown in the painting.

Fortunately, there are some primary sources available for historians. Jung (2018) points out that two contemporary Jesuit priests recorded important facts about Nicolet's journey. Jung's scholarship and research into the Jesuit priests' journals help provide a more accurate and believable narrative of Nicolet's journey. Jung has discovered that "Vimont and LeJeune, despite the brevity of their narrative, paint a far more accurate picture of the man" (p. 123).



Figure 1 Image of Rohbeck mural that hangs in the Brown County Courthouse

A more recent analysis of the primary sources has led to a better understanding of the complex relationships between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in 17th century North America. Many scholars agree that Wisconsin's "First Known European" was a Frenchman named Étienne Brulé. Brulé was another young, adventurous Frenchman working for Champlain (Hollway, 2015). Champlain sent Nicolet to create treaties between the Puans and their neighbors. Champlain understood that safe trading routes and peaceful relations between Native peoples were necessary before the French could extend the Fur Trade. Trading Posts were more lucrative than attempts to find unknown passages to the Orient.

Nicolet was qualified for this mission because he had spent years living with the Huron and learning the cultures and languages of the indigenous peoples around Quebec. Jung (2018) states, "His only objective was to negotiate peace between New France's allies and the Puans at Green Bay. Any other duties he performed were subordinated to this overreaching task. This meant that Nicolet was not an explorer. He was, on the other hand, a great diplomat during his years of service to New France" (p. 3). Instead of portraying Nicolet as an inappropriately dressed explorer who thinks it wise to introduce himself to a large crowd by firing two single-shot pistols in the air as depicted in paintings, modern

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scholars view Nicolet as a qualified and skilled politician. Champlain's desire to negotiate with the Puans reveals that they were a nation well respected by the Europeans.

RETHINKING THE NARRATIVE IN THE CLASSROOM

Older versions of the textbooks reflect the out-of-date scholarship. Wisconsin textbooks through the early 2000s still taught students that Nicolet was the first European in Wisconsin. The stories of his attempts to find the Northwest Passage and his mistaking of Native peoples as Chinese were prominently featured. As research improved, so did student resources. The Wisconsin Historical Society's newest textbook emphasizes Nicolet's role as a diplomat, and the American Indians feature prominently in the story. However, the Demming painting is still featured on the page with limited explanation. Instead of ignoring the older textbooks, these entries allow students to explore how historical interpretation and understanding can change.

Lesson Plan Steps and Activities

1. Students began the lesson by discussing where they have heard the name Nicolet before. Students often suggest banks, higher education institutions, and parks. This activity help students see that Nicolet is important enough to be commemorated in multiple ways.

2. Next, students read the entry from the most recent edition of their textbook and studied the modern painting and murals of Nicolet's arrival. Both entries allowed students to ask questions for further exploration. Students also analyzed entries from different textbook editions. They noted similarities that existed in multiple entries. Students wanted to know why Nicolet looked like a priest in his fancy robe and why he fired one-shot pistols if he was attempting to restore peace.

3. After completing step #2, students analyzed Jung's recent research and his interpretations of the work of the Jesuit missionaries. Due to the reading level, inaccessibility of the original sources, and language barrier, students used sections of Jung's book.

According to Jung's interpretation of the primary sources, students were correct in assuming that a knowledgeable ambassador was unlikely to approach a powerful nation in such a flamboyant style. According to the primary sources, "Nicolet and his crew fastened two sticks in the earth, and hung gifts thereon", so as to relieve these tribes from the notion of mistaking them for enemies to be massacred" (Jung, 2018, p. 127).

According to Jung, a peace offering makes more sense than firing pistols into the air. Jung also points out that Nicolet only sent one member of his party on scouting missions before entering the Puan village. The sources also revealed the answers to student questions about Nicolet's robe. Most scholars believe that Nicolet likely wore a green cape of high-quality Chinese fabric. This was an expensive piece of clothing but appropriate for a French ambassador on official business in the wilderness (Jung, 2018, p. 134). Jung points out that the green robe was imagined because of a poor translation of the original French and a lack of understanding of 17th-century fashion.



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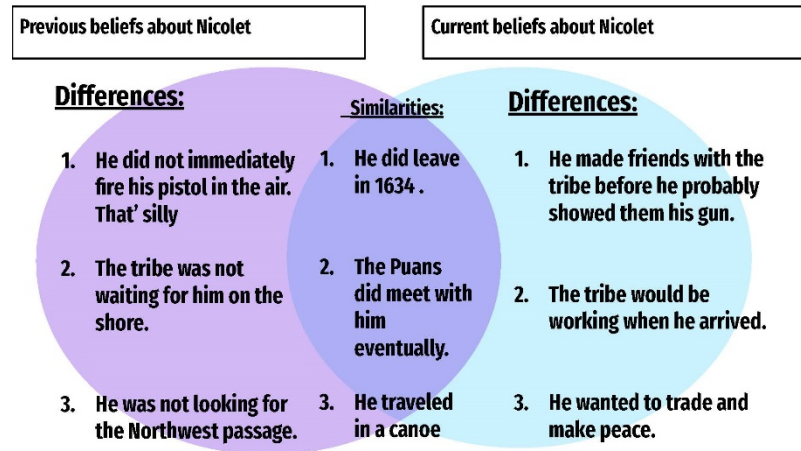


Figure 2 Student Venn Diagram comparing different viewpoints of Nicolet’s journey

4. After learning about more recent scholarship, students compared and contrasted the information they learned from the different sources, by completing Venn Diagrams. Many students commented that Jung’s use of the primary sources focused on the role of the native nations. After completing Venn Diagrams, students recreated the famous secondary images reflect the updated narrative more accurately. Students also wrote a letter to the Brown County Courthouse advocating changes to the current mural or wrote an entry for an updated textbook edition.

Dear Brown County Courthouse,
 I think you should change the picture in your court house. There would not be like an entire Menominee tribe by the shore at once, just waiting for him. Some might be there working or fishing. Also, it doesn’t make sense that he would fire his pistols that one fired one shot. What would he use for protection after that? We know enough facts about the journey to put in a more accurate picture that people can learn from. Please think about updating the mural.
 Thank you!

Figure 3 Student work sample

ADVOCATING FOR CHANGES IN STORIES

Textbooks can be valuable tools for students to learn how scholars have viewed history over time. For example, Jung (2018) states, “The reason Nicolet’s journey looms so large today

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Dear Brown County Courthouse,

I would greatly appreciate it if you replace the picture currently in the courthouse with one that is more historically accurate. I have done plenty of research and I can provide an accurate picture.

If you look at the picture I have provided, you will see Jean Nicolet leaving a gift of fur on the empty shore of Lake Michigan near Marinette, Wisconsin. His native companions stayed in the canoe since they were at war with the Ho Chunk people. And lastly, one lonely companion was sent off to attempt trade with the Menominee people.

I think you will agree with me when I ask you to use this picture which is more historically accurate.

Kind regards,

Colby

Figure 4 Student work sample



Figure 5 Student work sample



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is rooted in the mythology we have built around it. Much of it is pure Eurocentric bias” (p.151). Few modern retellings in textbooks or other accounts note that “Nicolet’s so-called accomplishment was one many Ottawa (and probably Hurons, Nipissings, and Algonquins) had achieved long before he did” (p.154). Changing murals and rewriting textbook entries offer meaningful assessments in classrooms, but students need to understand that making changes to memorials is not an easy task in the real world.

If society demands that public commemorations accurately reflect the historical record, citizens need to know how to search for and think critically about the variety of different sources available. Understanding the biases and limitations of all source creators is an essential skill for achieving this goal. These skills can and should be implemented in an elementary school setting. Students can be taught that thinking critically about historical sources in and outside the classroom is a natural component of studying history. Analyzing the benefits and limitations of textbooks and their authors can help students develop a deeper understanding of the evolving field of historical study.

Q & A WITH KATE VAN HAREN

Question #1:

Teacher’s Question:

How do you prepare your students to analyze multiple perspectives?

Kate Van Haren’s Response:

Understanding multiple perspectives is an essential skill for elementary social studies students. Students can consider multiple perspectives as soon as they start studying history. For example, students can identify all the different people in an image. They can make assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of these people based on what is happening in the image and their background information about the topic. When students are ready to begin reading primary sources, they can summarize the main idea of the source creator in their own words. Students can identify the people or groups of people mentioned in the source either by using the author’s own words or using their inference skills. When these groups of people have been identified, students can try and figure out how these people felt or thought about an event. For an additional challenge, students should consider what other groups of people might have invested in the event, even if not specifically mentioned by the source creator. Discussions can focus on why the source creator did not include these groups.

It is important for students to understand that the goal of historians is to try to find evidence that helps them understand the perspective of all involved in an event, but some people are often left out of the common narrative for many reasons. The complexities of the topics and the sources used should become more challenging as students become more comfortable considering multiple perspectives.

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Question #2:***Teacher's Question:***

Are there activities you do prior to this lesson that teaches them about the work of historians?

Kate Van Haren's Response:

The Reading Like a Historian framework created by the Stanford History Group (2022) has been an important guide in creating my curriculum. Although it is designed for higher grades, the key ideas can be adapted for the elementary classroom. When I teach this lesson in the third quarter of the school, students understand studying history is a process, and interpretations of events can change. Students engage in multiple inquiry-based lessons based on primary and secondary source analysis throughout the year, so they are comfortable thinking critically about different sources. Terms such as multiple perspectives and interpretations have been discussed in previous lessons. The lesson allows the students to see how these ideas apply to the study of history.

Students regularly use the Library of Congress's (2015) Observe, Reflect, and Question Primary Source Analysis Tool throughout the year. Although they don't fill in the actual form for this particular lesson, they are familiar with and comfortable using the steps to look at various sources, like the Nicolet drawing, on their own. The skills required for this lesson are introduced at the beginning of the year and used throughout the school year.

Question #3:***Teacher's Question:***

Do you have specific suggestions on how to engage students in asking questions of the textbook?

Kate Van Haren's Response:

Students should ask the same questions of a textbook that they would ask of any other source. Although a textbook is a secondary source, I start the school year by asking students to use the Library of Congress's (2015) Primary Source Analysis Tool. This tool is helpful when introducing students to the credentials of textbook authors and the purpose of a textbook publishing company. For example, a textbook company must create a textbook many students in many different areas can use.

I treat the textbook as another source of information to provide information about different topics throughout the year. After reading a section, the students and I discuss if the authors are credible enough to write on the topic and if additional information is needed to better understand the event. I often ask specific questions about who might have been at the event but wasn't discussed in the article or who was only briefly discussed. After several discussions, students can think about these questions on their own. These discussions are an excellent way to motivate students to engage in inquiry-based lessons with sources that

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provide information not discussed in their textbooks.

Question #4:***Teacher's Question:***

Where might teachers find resources to begin engaging students in how to critically analyze sources?

Kate Van Haren's Response:

Fortunately, many organizations have created elementary lessons focused on inquiry and source analysis. The Library of Congress's (2015) Primary Source Analysis Tool and its accompanying teacher's guide is one of the most accessible methods of getting kids to think critically about different sources. It can be applied to many different sources and topics. History's Mysteries (), a joint project between the Library of Congress and Waynesburg University, offers free inquiry-based units that challenge students to use primary sources to consider multiple perspectives of different events in American History.

KidCitizen, another project funded by the Library of Congress, uses interactive computer episodes to think critically about civics-related topics (Kidcitizen, 2022). These websites provide excellent resources for teachers new to engaging students in source analysis and provide frameworks for teachers to create lessons more specifically geared to their teaching standards and curricula.

Question #5:***Teacher's Question:***

How did you ensure student access to the primary sources? Did you need to adapt them, and if so, what suggestions do you have for teachers in how to do so?

Kate Van Haren's Response:

Using primary sources in elementary classrooms can be daunting. Reading level, accessibility, and language can make any meaningful understanding of source materials difficult. Analyzing a textbook chosen for them and in written at their reading level can serve as excellent introduction to source analysis. As students are learning to think critically about primary sources, images are also an excellent place to start. They can serve as both primary and secondary sources and allow students to consider important concepts such as the source creator's purpose. For example, students can consider why the picture was taken or why the drawing was created. They can also help students consider multiple perspectives by asking who was included and who was left out of the images.

When using text with elementary students, I often start with very small sections or a few quotes. I am very deliberate in choosing sections to help students understand the concepts they are trying to learn. Sometimes, I will rewrite sections or change words so students can understand the purpose or meaning of a source. When I do this, I show them an image of

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the actual primary source and give them some time to study it. I tell them when I change a primary source and emphasize that I am doing it so students can practice historical thinking skills. As students become more comfortable with primary source analysis skills and the language of different time periods, I have to do less cutting and translation. One of the most rewarding experiences as a teacher is witnessing a student's pride who has completed an in-depth analysis of a primary source with no additional support. This is the moment when students feel they are doing the work of historians.

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