

CATE PROFESSIONAL WRITING CONTEST

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A Brief Literary Interlude

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My class begins moving through the U.S. Civil War chapter of our 8th grade U.S. History textbook like Sherman marching through Georgia, and I don't like it!

That old bugaboo—our state content standards—is exerting pressure, forcing me to blaze through interesting history content as if I were in the business of checking items off a list. We are already in the month of April and I still have to cover Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. I begin entertaining thoughts of revising my original unit lesson plan and sacrificing a couple of interesting activities, all in the name of efficiency. There is, however, a cost to pay for such a move. My students run the risk of missing a great opportunity to delve into content capable of stirring their interests and examining valuable life lessons.

I'm a week behind two of my more experienced U.S. History teacher colleagues. They've figured out the right pace required to address all the state content standards in time for the California Standards Test and the district end of course exam. After teaching only English classes the past four years, having two sections of U.S. History to accompany my English teacher

duties finds me feeling very ineffective in terms of determining the optimal tempo, and I abhor the idea of students doing poorly on high stakes tests because of any miscalculation on my part.

No matter. I make a decision to slow the pace down and follow through with my original plans. I proceed to use class time to have students conduct internet research and give subsequent PowerPoint presentations on various subjects like General Robert E. Lee and the Battles of Antietam and Chancellorsville. Just as importantly, we also take valuable class time—one class period—to read a particular five-page short story. Certainly, I tell myself, we can afford this brief literary interlude to bask in the land of historical fiction.

Ray Bradbury's "Drummer Boy of Shiloh" is not in our U.S. History textbook. I can forge ahead and address all the state content standards without reading this fiction piece; but Bradbury's wonderful work of literature permits my students to supplement their informational text-intensive study of war by exploring a universal theme--'facing life's crisis' caused by loneliness, fear, and lack of purpose with dignity, faith and courage. This exploration takes the class beyond U.S. History content standards, but it's an option worth taking. As an English teacher I strongly feel this diversion is needed to make my students aware of the high drama associated with historical events. "Drummer Boy of Shiloh" accomplishes this objective in a far more creative and insightful way than our fact based non-fiction textbook.

I've waited all year long for this part of the 8th grade U.S. History course—without a doubt my favorite part of the curriculum. I've looked forward to sharing my knowledge of the war, and the challenge of generating an intense degree of student interest in a subject they know so little about. Armed with information acquired from attending this past summer's Gilder Lehman Institute seminar on the legacy of the U.S. Civil War, there are so many interesting vignettes and tidbits of information I want to pass along. And I want them prepared to fully appreciate next

week's field trip to a Civil War reenactment up in north San Diego County (My enthusiasm for this historical period was put to the test in November when I spent a weekend successfully writing a proposal for a field trip grant sponsored by Target).

"Drummer Boy of Shiloh" is special because of the story's main character, a young boy about the same age as my students. This new Army recruit is tasked with drumming a cadence when the battle starts. Boys and girls find no problem relating to his situation, a lonely boy, a runaway perhaps, who whimpers from fear the night before the big battle. He immediately wins my students' empathy. They are easily fascinated by the idea of such a young boy serving on the battlefield; they raise their hands as we read the story and say things like "This isn't right. Kids are too small to be fighting real soldiers," or "They don't even give him a gun." I tell them about the expendable "powder monkeys" who helped load cannons on eighteenth century British war ships, and explain how young boys in Africa are currently exploited as soldiers, a violation of human rights that goes largely unnoticed by the American public.

We talk about communication on the battlefield and how drums and bugles were once used to signal various commands. In this day of digital communications they are truly amazed people once exchanged information in such primitive ways.

We also marvel at the beautiful language used by Bradbury as he describes the peach blossoms, the soldiers' campfires, and the ominous metaphor comparing stacked rifles to skeletons.

Finally, the story grabs their interest as a gruff, unnamed general--perhaps Ulysses S. Grant--counsels the drummer boy named Joby, hoping to bolster this youngster's resolve by addressing the important role he will play in the battle. The general motivates the drummer boy, not by chastising him, but by explaining how he will be needed the next day. "You are the heart of the

army” the general advises. “If you beat slowly, the men will lag behind...If you beat fast with an ever-steady rhythm, then they will march together like one army and be united in one cause.” In doing so, the general gets Joby to put aside his own personal concerns and focus on how the army will depend on his ability to beat the right cadence. Joby gains comfort from being part of something larger than himself. Like most universal themes, this one teaches a valuable life lesson that can be easily understood by young teens.

A few days later when on our field trip to watch Civil War enthusiasts reenact a battle between Blue and Gray, students attentively follow the movements of the drummer boy. “Mr. Rodriguez, the drummer boy made it,” several students inform me after the battle. “The soldiers were marching to his drum beat,” they note. The students prod me to point out the opposing generals on horseback, figuring out if the reenactors accurately live up to their mental image of the general who spoke to Joby.

Months later I read *The New Yorker's* account of our military's surge effort in Iraq. The article describes how in the darkest days of the campaign General David Petraeus maintained his morale by finding time to read a book detailing General Ulysses Grant's own trials and tribulations during the Civil War. Petraeus sought special solace from Grant's words after the Battle of Shiloh's first bloody day in which the Confederate forces nearly forced a Union retreat. “Lick ‘em tomorrow, though,” Grant had firmly responded to one of his generals' observations of the damage inflicted by the rebels.

On that April day my class read “Drummer Boy of Shiloh” for far less weighty reasons than General Petraeus. I merely wanted to let the subject of the Civil War simmer in my students' minds for just a bit longer than usual. To invite such reflective questions as “What would I do, and how would I feel in similar circumstances?” and then return to the textbook to read about the

Civil War with a deeper understanding of the human drama involved in such a historical event. I wanted to avoid falling into the trap of racing through the textbook, intimidated by state content standards and high stakes testing. Yet, I find it fitting that my class and the heavily burdened General Patraeus both found time to study a moment at Shiloh and use that historical episode to our benefit.