Students’ Original Political Cartoons as Teaching and Learning Tools

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A meta-analysis of educators’ uses of political cartoons suggests they are mostly used for teaching interpretation skills and then usually only with gifted and older students. This demonstrates creative stagnation, limited elicitation of higher order thinking skills, and age bias. The researcher previously examined young adolescents’ use of effective and efficient technologies to express historical understandings through original political cartoon construction. This methodology elicited students’ higher order thinking as they expressed learning within their creations, which were then used as a teaching tool to facilitate constructive whole class interpretative discussions. The following questions extend previous research and guide this article: “How can one categorize students’ original political cartoons?” “Which categories illustrate most clearly student-creators’ learning?” “Which categories are the best teaching tools, as judged by elicitation of lengthy and healthy discussions?” To address the first question, the researcher categorized students’ original political cartoons and presented representative examples. To address the second question, the researcher triangulated students’ reflective descriptions of intended meanings, uses of historical content, and encoded symbolism and meanings. To address the third question, the researcher detailed how the original political cartoons impacted students’ thinking during class discussions in two dissimilar contexts.

Key Words: Social studies; history; political cartoons; teaching and learning; class discussion; criticality; expressivity

Introduction

While educational researchers and historians have examined the proper position for political cartoons in the classroom and in the historical field (Dodds, 2007; Werner, 2004), Diamond (2002) argued that no academic discipline has “truly embraced” rigorous political cartoon examination (p. 252). Researchers have suggested secondary teachers and college professors can best enable students’ analyses by providing background, calling attention to details, introducing controversial ideas, and assigning interpretative essays (Dougherty, 2002; Greenberg, 2005). These interpretative suggestions and age-specific recommendations are not surprising when considering the research literature surrounding the classroom role for political cartoons. A meta-analysis of the research literature indicated that teachers utilize political cartoons only for interpretation and then usually only with gifted or older students. As has been previously argued, neither trend is positive (Bickford, 2010a).

Cognitive education researchers denote interpretation to be a middle-tier higher order thinking skill (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom, 1956). While interpretative activities may elicit students’ engagement or constructive discussion, to only seek to elicit students’
interpretative skills is to lack pedagogical creativity. Interpreting professional (or published) political cartoons does not facilitate students’ expressions of original historical understandings because the students are not demonstrating newly constructed understandings.

Research indicates that political cartoons are generally used with gifted and older students, specifically secondary, university, and high achieving students (Frost, 2000; Ramsey, 2000; Risinger & Heitzmann, 2008; Sperry & Sperry, 2007). Teachers have encouraged such students to analyze political cartoons by recognizing background knowledge, identifying contextual clues, and decoding the employed symbolism (Dougherty, 2002). These skills are not limited to secondary, university, and high-achieving students. To suggest that young adolescent students cannot engage in such activities is to demonstrate a misunderstanding of their cognitive developmental abilities (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Welton, 2005).

Previous research has suggested that enabling students to create original political cartoons, using common technologies (like Microsoft PowerPoint and Paint) and internet imagery, has many educational benefits. This activity elicited the highest tiers of critical thinking, strong engagement, and, most important, creative expressions of original thinking with history content (Bickford, 2010a) and with current events content (Bickford, 2010b). Students’ original political cartoons generated healthy and robust classroom dialogue, allowed students to question the artist about his/her intended message (which is impossible with professional cartoonists’ published work), and employed effective and user-friendly technologies. Stated succinctly, original political cartooning enabled students to efficiently show what they learned. These projects then were used as a teaching tool during whole class interpretative discussions. Several questions, which form the basis for this research, have since emerged: “What do students’ original political cartoons look like and how can they be categorized?” “Which original political cartoons categories illustrate students’ learning?” “As judged by elicitation of healthy and constructive discussions, which original political cartoon categories were the best teaching tools?” To address these questions, the researcher returned to the previously collected data, which included students’ original political cartoons, transcribed interviews with students, and transcripts of class discussions.

**Research Literature**

Two demonstrable trends emerged from a meta-analysis of the research literature regarding how classroom educators use political cartoons. A thorough reading of two dozen articles revealed teachers traditionally employed political cartoons only for interpretative purposes and then only with secondary, university, and gifted students. As the following section details, neither trend is positive.

The first trend – political cartoons used for interpretation – does not challenge students at the highest levels of thinking and is less-than-innovative. It is pedagogically constructive to examine professional (published) cartoonists’ uses of symbolism when visually depicting a historical event or expressing a political perspective (Edwards, 1999a, 1999b; Frost, 2000; Johnstone & Nakhleh, 1987; Martinez-Fernandez, 1998; Mjagkij & Cantu, 1999; Percy, 1999; Werner, 2004). None of these interpretative activities, however, elicit the highest levels of criticality (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), facilitate historical thinking (Sunal & Haas, 2008; Welton, 2005; Wineburg, 2001), or enable expressions of original ideas (Swan, Hofer, & Levstik, 2007; Zemelman,
Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Discussion resulted, but since neither the teacher nor the students can definitively establish the artist’s intentions, the teacher’s interpretation likely shaped the classroom’s dynamics. These discussions, then, generated one-sided, “guess what the teacher is thinking” speculations (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006).

Enabling students to construct original political cartoons addresses the shortcomings of interpretation-only activities. The few researchers who suggested enabling students to create cartoons, however, concentrated less on students’ novel ideas and criticality and more on students’ understanding of the political cartoon creation process (Greene, 2001; Larson, 1999; Rolling, 2008). While not unproductive and has been previously argued, it represents creative stagnation for students to simply understand the political cartoon creation process or only interpret political cartoons (Bickford, 2010a).

The second trend – political cartoons are used only with gifted and older students – is limiting. While most researchers employed professionally published political cartoons with high school, college, or gifted students (Dougherty, 2002; Larson, 1999; Ramsey, 2000; Risinger & Heitzmann, 2008; Sperry & Sperry, 2007; Thomas, 2004), some suggested their value with younger students (Larson, 1999; Rolling, 2008; Rule, Sallis, & Donaldson, 2008). These proposals, though, contrast sharply with the many researchers who implied, suggested, or unequivocally claimed younger students were incapable of the complex historical thinking and the analytical work necessary to comprehend political cartoons’ intricate symbolism and encoded messages (Dougherty, 2002; El Refaie, 2009; Greene, 2001; Heitzman, 2000; Johnstone & Nakleh, 1987; Mjagkij & Cantu, 1999; Werner, 2002, 2003). The resultant impact of this age or ability preference has a limiting effect because it does not address young adolescent or middle level students’ cognitive developmental abilities.

Young adolescent students have proven capable of expressing newly constructed understandings during original political cartoon construction and proficient at critical analyses during dialogic interpretation (Bickford, 2010a, 2010b). These two research projects were proactive responses to the less-than-innovative and limiting trends that have emerged regarding educators’ classroom uses of political cartoons. The findings demonstrated that seventh grade, young adolescent students’ original political cartooning facilitated criticality, enabled expressivity, elicited lively and productive discussions, and challenged students to conceptualize history and current events as complex and unsettled in historical interpretation (Bickford, 2010a). Students effortlessly used uncomplicated technologies – like Microsoft PowerPoint, Paint, and the Internet – to generate the original political cartoons, which were far more effective than hand-drawn projects (Bickford, 2010b). Finally, students’ displayed marked enthusiasm and readily employed what Heitzman (2000) referred to as “the taxonomy of subskills” needed for political cartoon examination.

Methods

The data used to generate this paper comes from four sources: the seventh grade students’ original political cartoons, interviews with the seventh grade students about their original political cartoons, videotaped interpretative discussions about the seventh grade students’ work in the seventh grade classroom, and videotaped interpretative discussions about the seventh grade students’ work in a university classroom. The two-dozen seventh grade students lived and attended middle school in a
rural, Midwestern town. The 25 university students were pre-service education majors enrolled in a social studies methods class in a public comprehensive Midwestern university. This section describes these four data pools and justifies the employed mixed methodology.

Seventh grade students’ original political cartoons supplemented their examinations of the Japanese-American Internment (Bickford, 2010a) and current events (Bickford, 2010b). To develop their comprehensive historical understanding, students examined various primary historical documents reviewed multiple and contrasting secondary interpretations, and read a relevant historical fiction novel, My name is America: The journal of Ben Uchida, Citizen 13559, Mirror Lake Internment Camp (Denenberg, 2003). Students in the current events curricula selected, read, and summarized a newsworthy topic in a contemporary newspaper or magazine. In both contexts, students expressed newly constructed understandings and opinions through an original political cartoon, presented their work to the class, and allowed the class to interpret their cartoon’s meaning. Combining both studies generated 314 individual samples of seventh grade students’ original political cartoons. From this collection, three categories of students’ original political cartoons emerged: the complex, the transparent, and the constructively ambiguous. This content provided data for the researcher to address the first question: “What do students’ original political cartoons look like and how can they be categorized?”

The teacher-researcher videotaped the seventh grade students’ interpretative discussions during a social studies class. During each 45 minute class session, the students dialogically negotiated the encoded meaning(s) of their peers’ original political cartoons. Combining the research on original political cartoons for history and current events generated 11 different 45 minute class sessions. The pre-service education students’ interpretative whole-class discussions about the seventh grade students’ work were videotaped. This took place in a social studies methods class in an Elementary and Middle Level Education department at a Midwestern comprehensive university. During this class session of 120 minutes, the university students examined fifteen representative examples of students’ original political cartoons from each of the three categories. An analysis of the transcribed discussions of seventh graders and university students provided data to answer the third question: “As judged by the elicitation of healthy and constructive discussions, which original political cartoon categories were the best teaching tools?”

The research questions dictated the employment of mixed methodology. To address the first question, the researcher categorized the seventh grade students’ original political cartoons using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Schwandt, 1997; Uddin, 2002). To address the second question, the researcher triangulated the interviews with the content of students’ original political cartoons. To address the third question, the researcher examined the impact on class discussion of each original
political cartoon category. To investigate if the categories elicited similar responses between two different age groups, the researcher analyzed the videotaped class sessions from the middle school and the university classes.

Results

The first section investigates the first two research questions: “What do students’ original political cartoons look like and how can they be categorized?”, and “Which original political cartoon categories illustrate students’ learning?” To examine the first question, the researcher categorized students’ work. For illustrative purposes, representative examples of each category are presented. To examine the second question, students’ comments – which indicate learning – follow the original political cartoons.

Students’ Original Political Cartoons and Students’ Learning

The students constructed original political cartoons in the context of a history class studying the Japanese-American Internment (Bickford, 2010a) and current events (Bickford, 2010b). For clarity of comparison between original political cartoon categories, this paper will only utilize as examples students’ original political cartoons generated from the history curricula.

This section is organized around the three categories of students’ original political cartoons: the complex, the transparent, and the constructively ambiguous. Complex original political cartoons employed three or more “visual rhetorical devices” (Werner, 2003), like encoded messages and symbolism, and had a readily comprehensible message. Transparent original political cartoons employed two or less visual rhetorical devices and had a readily comprehensible message. Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons employed visual rhetorical devices, but their meaning was not readily apparent. A compilation of 314 examples indicated that the vast majority of students constructed either a complex (119) or a transparent (179) original political cartoon, with a much smaller number (16) of students generating constructively ambiguous cartoons. These proportions were statistically similar when distinguishing between original political cartoons intended for the history curriculum and original political cartoons intended for the current events curriculum.

For clarity, the students’ intended meaning(s) of their original political cartoons follow their work. For brevity, these will be summations of the student’ comments, gleaned from individual interviews. (All names are pseudonyms.)

Complex original political cartoons

Like thirty-eight percent of her seventh grade classmates, Arissa constructed a complex original political cartoon. As mentioned previously, complex original political cartoons employed three or more visual rhetorical devices, such as encoded messages and symbolism, and expressed a readily comprehensible message. Arissa’s opposition to the Internment was evident in her original political cartoon as she focused on the duality of Japanese-American’s citizenship and ethnicity. She tried to elicit sympathy for the Japanese-American children, whom she felt were probably quite patriotic, confused about why they were interned, and unfairly impacted by the Internment due to their obvious non-involvement in espionage. Arissa based her inferences on previous experience examining various primary and secondary historical sources. To illustrate the Japanese-Americans’ duality between citizenship and ethnicity along with the Japanese-American’s children’s patriotism, confusion, and unfair treatment,
Arissa utilized complex visual rhetorical devices typical of political cartoons (Werner, 2003). Arissa (see Figure 1) employed a photograph of students pledging allegiance to the American flag as a background. To elicit questions about its authenticity, she selected an Internment photograph that pictured Japanese-American, European-American, and African-American students noting, “I wanted people to wonder if it was real.”

Arissa manipulated two images, one obvious and one obscure, to add complexity or visual profundity. The obvious manipulation was the embedded photonegative of praying hands in the upper left-hand corner. She added these praying hands to emphasize the Japanese-American children’s prayers for Japan, much like how the larger image highlights their allegiance to America. The obscure manipulation was Arissa’s deliberate reversal of the flag-pledging image to show the detainees’ left hands over their heart. She reversed this picture to assert that something “is wrong” with the image just as something was wrong with the Internment. Arissa implanted the textual statement, “We pledge for America; We pray for Japan” towards the bottom of the picture. She purposefully selected the color blue for this text because, as she stated during the interview, “black might show death, which is sad, and other colors wouldn’t fit, you know, red might mean blood, green might mean money, and the other colors [would not fit the detainees’ feelings]” (Bickford, 2010a, p. 56).

![Figure 1. Arissa: “We pledge for America, We pray for Japan.”](image)


Arissa’s original political cartoon and her reflective comments about her creation indicate her ability to express newly constructed historical understandings. She constructed these historical understandings through rigorous examination of primary and secondary historical documents. From this, it can be inferred that Arissa’s creative work demonstrated learning.

Arissa’s artistic expressivity included multiple and varied visual rhetorical devices, which resulted in categorization of her original political cartoon as complex. While not every student identified and decoded every symbolic feature, the vast majority of both seventh grade and university students correctly interpreted the intended meaning of Arissa’s original political cartoon. No one proffered a divergent interpretation. The complexity of the encoded messages within Arissa’s original political cartoon distinguished it from others, especially those categorized as transparent.

**Transparent original political cartoons**

Like 57% of his seventh grade classmates, Reggie constructed a transparent original political cartoon. Transparent original political
cartoons employed two or less visual rhetorical devices and had a readily comprehensible message. Reggie strongly defended the American government’s decision to intern Japanese-Americans. Reggie focused on the Japanese military’s attack on Pearl Harbor to support his perspective, concentrating on the resultant chaos of, and the impacted soldiers’ opinions about, the attack (see Figure 2). To illustrate chaos, Reggie selected an image from a contemporary movie entitled Pearl Harbor. Instead of employing an authentic photograph, Reggie selected an image from a Hollywood recreation to more accurately portray his view of reality to his audience. Reggie stated that a black-and-white image might not best demonstrate the chaos to an audience of adolescents inexperienced with non-color images. To illustrate Reggie’s perceptions of the American soldiers’ opinions about Japan and Japanese-Americans, Reggie inserted a speaking bubble around a soldier’s face giving voice to what Reggie believed the soldier likely felt. Reggie’s original political cartoon, noted for its simplicity and clarity of message, had no hidden messages.

The content of Reggie’s original political cartoon and his reflective comments substantiated his ability to express newly constructed historical understandings. Reggie generated these historical understandings through a thorough examination of an assortment of historical documents. The researcher concluded that Reggie’s original political cartoon demonstrated learning. Reggie’s original political cartoon was categorized as transparent because it included few visual rhetorical devices and all the seventh grade and university students correctly interpreted its intended meaning. No one proffered a divergent interpretation. As previously noted, over half of Reggie’s peers created transparent original political cartoons.

Figure 2. Reggie: “The Japanese did it. Lock them up!!”


Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons

About 5% (16) of seventh grade students created constructively ambiguous original political cartoons, employing visual rhetorical devices, whose meaning was not clear, thus providing multiple interpretative possibilities. Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons utilized visual rhetorical devices, but their meaning was not obvious. Courtney constructed a representative example of a constructively ambiguous original political cartoon to communicate the duality between citizenship and ethnicity that Japanese-American’s felt. Meticulous examination of various historical documents enabled Courtney to construct these historical understandings. In her words, “[N]o matter how much they felt American, they were still looked at as Japanese. They were citizens, but they were locked up ‘cause they looked Japanese” (Bickford, 2010a, p. 54). Courtney wanted to show that Internment detainees were both Japanese and American and she did this by implanting what
she thought was the Japanese flag onto the American flag. She generated this idea by noting the similarities of red stripes between the American flag and the naval ensign of Japan. Courtney’s original political cartoons and her reflective comments about her creation confirmed her ability to express newly constructed historical understandings in this medium. Courtney’s original political cartoon (see Figure 3) demonstrated her learning in this instance.

Figure 3. Courtney: Untitled.


As the reader will see in the following section, students spent more time analyzing the encoded messages within Arissa’s original political cartoon than Reggie’s and students agreed on the meaning of both. This was not the case with Courtney’s constructively ambiguous original political cartoon. Both seventh grade and university students engaged in interpretative discussions about Courtney’s intended meaning within her original political cartoon. Students proffered multiple and divergent interpretations, which generated lengthy discussions. The seventh graders proffered two divergent interpretations. University students suggested these same two, and then offered two more interpretations. In both class contexts, students’ discussions did not culminate in consensus. Since just two images form the basis for Courtney’s original political cartoon, their contextual interaction shaped all four interpretations. Every university and seventh grade student who verbalized an opinion during discussion identified the stripes section of the American flag and recognized the Rising Sun as being symbolic of Japan.

All interpretations focused on the contextual interactions between both flags. Based on the shared space of both flags, seventh grade and university students verbalized the first interpretation that this original political cartoon illustrated the duality of citizenship and ethnicity Japanese-Americans likely felt. The students focused on the American flag’s stripes and the Rising Sun of Japan. Seventh grade and university students also vocalized a second interpretation, which focused on Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and noted that the Rising Sun of Japan “covered up” the stars of the American flag. In this second interpretation, students speculated that Japan – through war – tried to take over the United States referring to how the Japanese emblem in Courtney’s original political cartoons covered up the stars representing the U.S. states.

University students offered two other interpretations. Knowing that university students – who have been exposed to far more history courses than seventh graders – offered these interpretations, they might have been based on a stronger understanding of 19th century American history, 20th century Japanese military history in the Pacific, and 20th century American military action in Asia. In the third interpretation, university students suggested that the Rising Sun of Japan was “pushing out” into America through territorial expansion much as 19th century America expanded using the rationale of Manifest Destiny (Greenberg, 2005). In one student’s words, “Japan at this time wanted to expand like America had done earlier, this shows Japan spreading out American-style.”
Seven university students during the discussion either supported or reiterated this interpretation. Evidence to support this interpretation, as noted by university students, was seen in the Rising Sun expanding through red rays into and onto the American flag’s stripes in much the same way as the American flag’s red stripes pushed side-to-side. The fourth interpretation, verbalized only by university students, was the mirror opposite of the third interpretation. University students suggested that the American flag’s stripes pushed into and onto the Rising Sun of Japan much as the U.S. military constructed bases throughout Asia in the 20th century. As one university student noted, “The Japanese probably felt America had no business building bases in the Pacific, they felt infringed on, and this [original political cartoon] showed that.” This interpretation demonstrates a more comprehensive understanding of 20th century American military history in Asia, but also a lack of knowledge about the naval ensign of Japan.

The four interpretations are each historically accurate interpretations of Courtney’s constructively ambiguous original political cartoon. The seventh grade and university students lengthy interpretative dialogue demonstrated how Courtney’s work elicited multiple and divergent interpretations. Further, during her class, Courtney expressed authentic excitement that her original political cartoon elicited so many and varied interpretations.

Representative examples of the previously categorized students’ original political cartoons and individual students’ reflective comments about their work demonstrate students’ learning during this experience. Students’ original political cartoons also were used to teach others. This next section seeks to answer the question: “As judged by the elicitation of healthy and constructive discussions, which original political cartoon categories were the best teaching tools?” To address this question, quality original political cartoons, when used as teaching tools, consequentially impact on others’ thinking.

Characteristics of Quality Original Political Cartoons as Teaching Tools

The purpose of this section is to investigate the research question: “As judged by the elicitation of healthy and constructive discussions, which original political cartoon categories were the best teaching tools?” To address this question, the best original political cartoons – as teaching tools – elicit lengthy, complex discussions where students proffer divergent interpretations using historical evidence. But, what specific characteristics about the original political cartoon categories elicited lengthy, complex discussions where students utilized evidence during interpretative discussions? Before these characteristics can be discussed, consideration must be given to the purpose for which students construct original political cartoons. There seems to be three possible responses derived from data. The first possible response is for students to express a newly constructed historical understanding. The second is for students to employ complicated visual rhetorical devices typical of political cartoonists to express a newly constructed historical understanding. The third is for students to employ complicated visual rhetorical devices typical of political cartoonists to express a newly constructed historical understanding resulting in lengthy and healthy class discussions.

If the purpose of original political cartoon work was to express a historical understanding, then two categories of original political cartoons might suffice: the transparent and the complex. One could make the case, then, that Reggie’s transparent original political cartoon was
sufficient because it expressed its meaning efficiently and effectively through its simplicity and clarity of message. Arissa’s complex original political cartoon – with its intricate visual rhetorical devices – was clear enough to facilitate a uniform interpretation, but did not have the clarity of Reggie’s. Since all students verbally agreed on a single interpretation for both Reggie’s and Arissa’s original political cartoons, this indicates their original political cartoons’ abilities to clearly express a historical understanding. The same cannot be said for Courtney’s original political cartoon. If expressing a historical understanding was the sole goal of original political cartoon work, Courtney’s original political cartoon might draw criticism because students, as a class, could not draw a uniform conclusion with certainty. The interpretative possibilities within Courtney’s original political cartoon were too extensive.

If the purpose of original political cartooning was to express newly constructed historical understandings utilizing complicated visual rhetorical devices typical of professional political cartoonists, then again two categories of original political cartoons might prove sufficient: the complex and the constructively ambiguous. Both Arissa’s complex original political cartoon and Courtney’s constructively ambiguous original political cartoon encoded various symbols and visual rhetorical devices. For each category, both seventh grade and university students identified potential symbols and visual rhetorical devices, and then speculated about their intended meaning. The same cannot be said for Reggie’s transparent original political cartoon; its message was too obvious and his employment of symbolism was scant.

If the purpose of original political cartooning was to express newly constructed historical understandings utilizing complicated visual rhetorical devices typical of professional political cartoonists that resulted in lengthy and healthy class discussions, then constructively ambiguous original political cartoons are the best teaching tools. Only constructively ambiguous original political cartoons, like Courtney’s, resulted in multifaceted discussions. Both the seventh grade and university students utilized historical understandings to engage in healthy interpretative discussion about Courtney’s original political cartoon. The interpretative discussions from both class contexts were similar in tone, but not detail. Courtney’s work, like other constructively ambiguous original political cartoons, employed a visual rhetorical device was complicated and unclear enough to elicit numerous interpretations, none of which resulted in consensus. The discussions about Courtney’s original political cartoon were productive, messy, and remained unresolved. To speak colloquially, this is not a bad thing. To paraphrase Dewey (1933), criticality flourishes when confusion abounds. Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons elicited far lengthier discussions than complex or transparent.

Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons elicited the longest whole-class discussions. As demonstrated in the discussion surrounding Courtney’s original political cartoon, students extensively discussed its meaning. Complex original political cartoons, like Arissa’s, elicited a respectable length of discussion (10 minutes on average) although such discussion took a little more than half of the time (56%) when compared to the time students spent discussing constructively ambiguous original political cartoons (18 minutes on average). The length of discussion time, however, does not indicate a quality discussion. The quantity of interpretations proffered, when combined with the length of a discussion, more readily suggests a quality
interpretable discussion about the historical understandings expressed within a student’s original political cartoon. Multiple and competing analyses compel a lengthier conversation which suggests the possibility of a healthy interpretative discussion. Based on the collected data, constructively ambiguous original political cartoons elicited the highest average of divergent opinions suggested by students.

Due to a lengthier average discussion and a higher rate of proffered interpretations, constructively ambiguous original political cartoons appear to be the best teaching tools in this study and with this sample. Constructively ambiguous original political cartoons, like the one Courtney created, appeared to most effectively stimulate robust and continuous class discussions and elicit the most interpretations. These characteristics are indicative of quality teaching tools.

**Conclusions**

This research has many important findings. Enabling students to create, share, and interpret original political cartoons has the potential to facilitate students’ expression of newly developed understandings of historical events and contemporary issues (Bickford, 2010a, 2010b). Students’ original political cartoons were found in this study to elicit engagement, high levels of criticality, creative expressivity, and healthy analytical discussions. This research study indicated that seventh grade students created three categories of original political cartoons. Within each category, students’ original political cartoons expressed learning, based on newly constructed understandings generated from examination of various primary and secondary historical sources. All three original political cartoon categories elicited discussion, with two eliciting lengthy discussions. The constructively ambiguous original political cartoons generated multiple and varied interpretations challenging students to critically examine the historical bases for the original political cartoon’s expressed and encoded message. Lengthy and constructive discussions among both seventh grade and university students about original political cartoons suggest their effectiveness as teaching tools. This study indicates that teachers should consider Diamond’s (2002, p. 252) claim that no academic discipline has “truly embraced” rigorous political cartoon examination and carry out their own action research to investigate applicability of such examination to their students. Work with original political cartoons can challenge students to understand, use, and apply knowledge, facilitating students’ analyses and evaluation during interpretative discussions. Researchers detail the aforementioned verbs (understand, use, apply, and create) and nouns (analyses and evaluation) as the bases for all tiers of higher order thinking (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom, 1956). The author encourages further research with younger students and with other curricula.
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