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## Middle School Review

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### **Overcoming Teaching Challenges During a Global Pandemic**

**By Amy Vigil**



Amy Vigil currently teaches 8th grade U.S. History at Roosevelt IB Middle School in the San Diego Unified School District and is a Social Studies Methods instructor at San Diego State University. She recently completed her 13th year of teaching and was the recipient of the school site Teacher of the Year award in the 2014-2015 academic year. Amy is also a member of the California Geographic Alliance and a CGEP (California Global Education Project) advisory board member at San Diego State University. Amy received her B.A. and M.A. from San Diego State University.

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As a U.S. History and Geography teacher, teaching social studies during an election year is like the Olympics or World Cup. It only happens every four years and I find myself at the edge of my seat waiting to see how the competition unfolds as Election Day nears and the results make their impact on our country and the world. I have had big plans brewing over the last few years about all of the cool and engaging activities I would do with my students for the 2020 election, until everything changed on Friday, March 13, 2020. As of writing this article, my district, and the school have not returned to in-person instruction in any way. There have been immeasurable changes to life since COVID-19 began and it makes all former plans for classroom instruction seem

antiquated. I will cover the 2020 election along with as much of the standard content that I can cover in the distance learning setting, but it is different. We are in the midst of a global pandemic that means instead of greeting our students at the door of our classrooms. A chime to let us know when each student has entered our virtual classrooms on Zoom now greets us. We are in “survival mode” and work to recreate our assignments, redesign our classroom management plans, and rediscover what it is like to be new at teaching again. I am in survival mode and writing from a different place as a teacher because I feel like a first-year teacher who just wants to “get it right” and figure out how to be successful in supporting student learning. As a result, my former attachment to the

previous election curriculum has been replaced with a focus on my approach to teaching this year based around a theme that will help me not only hold it together when things get hard but also thrive as I reach mini-goals and experience the joys of teaching in the new virtual way. One important guiding question for my classes this year is “How do people overcome challenges they have never faced before?” because it felt most appropriate to focus on something both teachers and students have in common right now.

While planning the curriculum for this year, I needed something to anchor my approach to teaching about how people overcome challenges. So, I decided to create a digital weekly journal for my students to write about their feelings, reactions, and thoughts in regards to all of the things happening in our country and at home right now. I call it our “History in the Making Journal” and my thought is this; we are living through one of the most historically challenging times in modern history and student voices need to be heard, valued, and remembered because they are also doing this for the first time too. I have recently learned to appreciate how important Anne Frank’s diary was to Anne Frank, and my goal is to give that opportunity to my current and future students.

I have created this digital “History in the Making Journal” weekly assignment where I ask students to write about a topic or headline of the week so that they can create their own primary source. Students have a choice between two thought-provoking questions to answer, or they can answer them both. They

also have to summarize their week with either a few sentences or the theme of “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” Reading student journals has brought me joy, helped me understand my students’ perspectives, and reminded me that the mental health and well-being of my students is far more important than any lesson I could possibly be giving them about history. So far, I have learned that many of my students have strong relationships with their grandparents, they are struggling with mental health, and they are very troubled by how they see adults behaving during this pandemic and election season. Of course, there is so much more, but by creating this opportunity for students to journal and explain their perspective and personal experiences, they are practicing the habits of writing, thinking, discussing, and being vulnerable.

As I searched for resources to support engaging and open-ended questions I found that I was not the only one who had the digital journaling idea, in fact, several resources on the web offer support in creating a digital journal. The resource I found to be most in alignment with my thoughts and ideas for this journal was the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum. This curriculum does a great job of providing ideas for journaling in a remote environment and I have used several of their journal-prompts for my classroom. For example, I have used questions such as Explain a childhood game that makes you feel free; What is a memory you have of playing the game?; Why does it make you feel free? I have also used a prompt which asks students to write a letter to themselves

during the coronavirus pandemic and What do you want your future self to know about this time? I have come to enjoy reading these journals and learning about my students in a new way, especially when they add pictures or memes. I will continue to use weekly journal entries as long as I am teaching virtually, but I will also continue using them when I am back in the physical classroom. Of course, while journaling is a great tool and an easy way to learn about our students and their perspectives, it is not the only way I have addressed the theme of our guiding question, "How do people overcome challenges they have never faced before?" For that, my old approaches have to evolve to address this unprecedented time in history that we find ourselves in.

Do you remember the days when we would put a group of students around a piece of construction paper and have them brainstorm, talk, and discuss the content of our lessons? Since that is now long gone, I set out to find a new way for students to be creative, collaborate, and produce meaningful work with the new lens of overcoming challenges. First, I adjusted my curriculum to be purposeful about the inclusion of Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). For example, I took my former Historical Mind Mirror assignment, which asks students to consider the mindset of a historical figure in United States history, and asked students to select a BIPOC figure who overcame challenges in history. Shifting the focus to BIPOC historical figures allowed my students to experience a different perspective that may not typically be spotlighted. Second, I gave students self-management options that I real-

ized were important for teaching on Zoom. For example, I offered breakout room options with the choices of working in a challenge group, working independently, working with anyone who wants to join a random group (that promises to unmute and discuss), and/or working with a predetermined group of peers (that will encourage each other to be successful). I have never had to think of grouping in that fashion, but I would like to believe that it gave students the choice of how to overcome their personal insecurities and challenges of being on Zoom. Third, I created part of my assignments to require students to videotape themselves. For example, in addition to the introduction videos, I had students make when we studied the New Jersey v. T.L.O Supreme Court case I had students pretend as if they were the judge in this case. Ultimately, they had to decide whether or not the student in question (T.L.O) had her 4th Amendment rights violated and record themselves on video explaining and defending their choice with evidence from the case. I found earlier in the year that students made several excuses for not knowing how to upload a video so I gave the option of submitting a Flipgrid video, a Youtube link, a video from their camera phone, or a video from their school Chromebook. Personally, I am a huge fan of Flipgrid due to its user-friendly interface in setting up classrooms and creating or viewing assignments. Watching student videos gave me the opportunity to overcome the challenge I was having of not seeing my students behind their cameras during class. Ultimately, these videos allowed me to experience a much-needed personal connection with my students that at times may have been

taken for granted in normal years. In addition, these videos allowed me to see my students' perspectives regarding a historical, yet relevant, Supreme Court Case. While my strategies may appear to only be slight adjustments to what I would do in-person and are not cutting-edge, they have supported me in navigating the challenge of teaching during this unprecedented and historical time.

All students and teachers have different challenges with distance learning and it is so hard to know what exactly to do to impact and support the most kids. However, I do

believe that we have to try. Use the tips, tricks, and strategies that work for you and ditch the ones that don't. Recognizing that that year will be hard and filled with uncertainties is what pushed me to focus on thematic teaching for my short nine-week quarters with students. Teaching from the lens of how people in history faced and overcame challenges reminds me to be honest in my teaching and open to what my students need. The strategies will be figured out along the way and we will get through it all together.

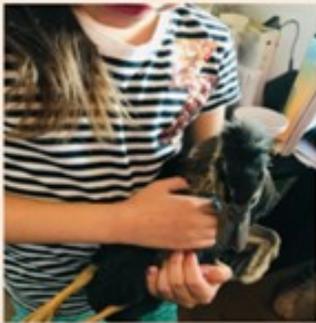
### **Week of: September 7-11th**

#### **Questions:**

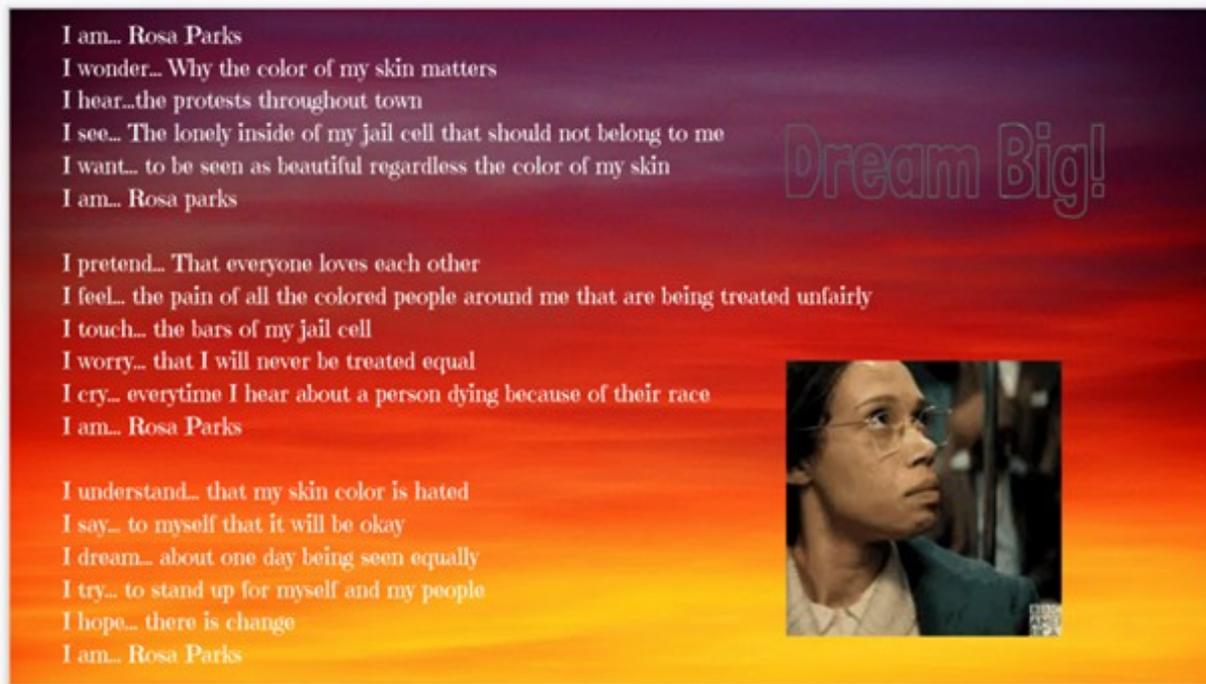
1. Explain a childhood game that makes you feel free. What is a memory you have of playing the game? Why does it make you feel free?

#### **Response:**

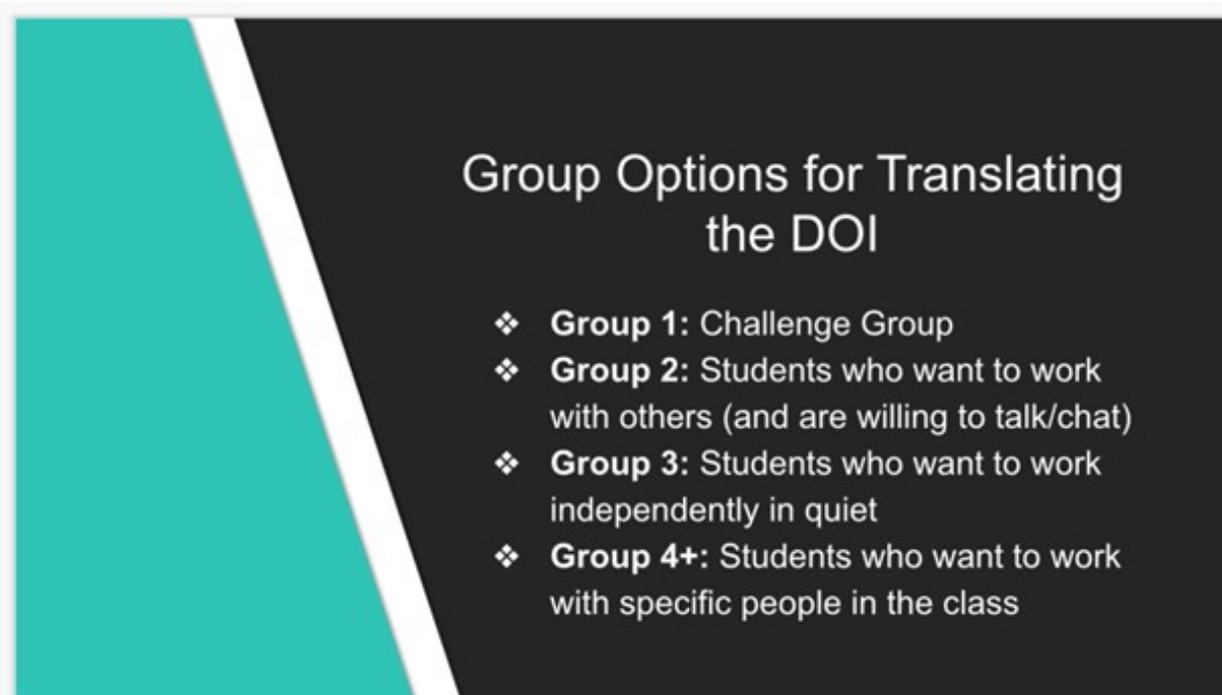
When I was a little my grandma used to live in a house with an outside door, if you opened the door it would lead to a big tall grassy field. Every kid would stand in a line at the beginning of the field then we would run across it. It wasn't a race, you could feel the cold breeze going toward you when you ran. It made me feel like no one was around me and that I could do anything I wanted. One time we were running and we saw a snake. We all screamed, when we went back it was just an oddly shaped stick. It was so funny. Sadly my grandma wanted to move so she could get a house which aloud chickens and ducks. (my grandma still has her chickens and duck, the picture is at the bottom) It made me feel free because I felt like no one was watching, the wind was in my hair and the sun was shining bright.



Example of student journal prompt with response and picture.



Example of student Historical Mind Mirror slide on Rosa Parks



Example of my class slides for students working in Breakout Rooms



Example of my students working in Breakout Rooms