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In *The Spiritstone Saga*, upper primary students are guided through scenarios by a mysterious gem to learn about early Indigenous/settler relations.

Ugly Ink (Sam Moore)

Student Voice Through Student Narrative Choice

Giving students choice over a storyline in which they are the main character gives them more passion for the historical content.

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If we want our students to be lifelong learners, we need to constantly engage them. Making learning interesting can't be an afterthought. When students have choice over their learning, they feel more ownership over it and develop a passion for the material. As History educators we have a huge natural advantage in that a lot of historical knowledge can be told as a narrative. Let's harness this advantage and place our students inside the story.

What?

A learning adventure tells a historical story as a narrative in which learners take a first-person point of view through a series of scenarios, working either independently or in small groups. The students read content material and complete skills activities, either in a booklet format or online, and then show the teacher what they've done. If they've completed the task correctly, they advance in the story; if not, the teacher quickly teaches the skill and the student has another attempt.

There are many benefits to this system. First, the teaching of the skill is contained in the booklet; if a student can learn the skill just from reading this, the teacher doesn't need to spend any time teaching it. Far too much class time is wasted teaching students things they could learn themselves if they weren't held back and made to work at the pace of the least able student.

Second, the teacher's time in class is spent giving feedback. When I teach using learning adventures, 80–90% of my time is spent giving students one-on-one feedback about their performance. I also have an individual interaction with every student in every lesson.

Third, once the learning adventure is created, no more of the teacher's time is required for planning. From the teacher's point of view, the actual lesson time is more intense as you are giving feedback to students who are lining up to hear it.

» Ben Lawless, 'Student Voice Through Student Narrative Choice,' *Agora* 55:2 (2020), 40–43 «

3	Asks inferential question	Puts events on a timeline using correct spacing	Places source in historical context	Uses historical context to empathise with person from history	Explains knowledge
2	Ask open-ended question	Puts events on a timeline in correct order	Uses source to learn about history	Empathises with a person from history	Summarises knowledge
1	Asks literal question	Put events in correct order	Describes literal features of source	Recognises a viewpoint	Lists knowledge
Difficulty	**Questioning**	**Sequencing**	**Analysing sources**	**Understanding historical perspectives**	**Using knowledge**

Table 1. Five skills and three difficulty levels for the *Spiritstone Saga*.

Using a learning adventure swaps lessons from being teacher-led to being student-led. Rather than a teacher occupying most of a lesson talking or teaching one thing to learners who are all at different levels, and then having an assessment weeks later, learning adventures self-differentiate as students work at their own pace, and teachers assess every student in every lesson.

How?

To create a learning adventure, you need some curriculum content knowledge broken down into sub-topics that you piece together in narrative order. This will often be different to the order in which topics are typically taught. For instance, soldiers fighting in World War I didn't know the causes of the war before battle—they learned about them years later, if at all. You also need a set of skills to teach and some ideas about how students can show what they know. If you want your adventure to be developmental, create a rubric that has a progression of skills on it.

For example, for the *Spiritstone Saga*, an upper primary learning adventure I wrote for the National Museum of Australia, I picked five skills:

- questioning
- sequencing
- analysing sources
- understanding historical perspectives
- using knowledge.

Skill	Defining Moment (content)	Activity
Q3: Asks inferential question	1871: Australian Natives' Association	Read text. Think of questions that they would need to use clues from the text to answer (that aren't directly answered in the text).
Q2: Asks open-ended question	1838: Myall Creek massacre	Ask questions that open up other questions. Complete the graphic organiser.
Q1: Asks literal question	1770: Cook claims Australia	Complete question grid.
	Questioning	

Table 2. The final planning table for the Questioning skill.

I then came up with three levels of ability for each (1 = easiest, 3 = most difficult). Students complete easier tasks that scaffold them to complete more difficult tasks (Table 1).

I then matched the skills with content. In this example, my content came from the National Museum's 'Defining Moments' online exhibit, but for most Year 7–12 teachers they will take the content from the curriculum. I tried to match skills with content I thought most appropriate. Finally, I came up with an activity for each piece of content. Again, I tried to come up with activities I thought most appropriate. Table 2 is a portion of the final planning table for the 'questioning' skill.

Then I had to turn this into a narrative. The story had to go in chronological order. I also wanted to add choices for students to make.

In the Year 8 learning adventure *Conquista*, students serve as research assistants to a Spanish professor by travelling around Central America in the early 1500s.

GazzaS (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Which part of the adventure did they want to do next? Even though students had choices, in this instance I wanted every student to have learned about the same compulsory content material.

This won't always be the case. In fact, it will make your learning adventure much more interesting if there is a core of content that is compulsory, but also some random sub-topics that students can choose so that not everyone has the same experience. Not only do students get to pick what they find interesting, you are more likely to hear students discuss the activity with each other to find out the different 'rabbit holes' others went down.

The final map of the narrative is at www.bit.ly/spiristonemap. The first number code given on each map point refers to the 'page' (or webpage in this case, as this has been put online) that the sub-adventure is on. The alphanumeric code (e.g. Q1) refers to Table 1, showing which skill, content area and activity will be done at that point in the story.

With the structure of the narrative in place, all that needed to be created was the actual storyline. The reason I do it this way is because the narrative is really just a vehicle for the content knowledge and historical skills.

In learning adventures, you often need some kind of plot device that allows you to put the student in lots of different places. In this adventure, the 'Spiritstone' is a magic gem that the student finds at the start of the adventure. As each task is completed, the gem glows to indicate it has been done correctly, and then telepathically asks the student what they want to do next.

Why?

Students are much more engaged when they have choice over how they learn. The engagement when students learn using learning adventures is really high, and in many cases the problem is too much engagement so that students end up completing the entire adventure in a fraction of the time set for it. What do students themselves say?

- We got to go at our own pace, and we didn't have to just sit there and listen like in other classes.

RESOURCES

Learning adventure material:
https://lawlesslearning.com/free/learningadventures/
https://lawlesslearning.com/pd/learningadventures2/

***The Spiritstone Saga*, an upper primary Australian history learning adventure:**
https://sites.google.com/view/thespiritstonesaga/home

***AusQuest*, an upper primary colonial Australian history learning adventure:**
https://ausquest.wordpress.com/

Online plot generators:
https://www.plot-generator.org.uk/
https://writingexercises.co.uk/plotgenerator.php

- It had the same concept as a game, which made me want to do it all.
- I liked how I was able to work at my own pace, and how it was set in a storyline.
- You didn't get controlled by the teachers.
- It wasn't the same thing the whole time, and it allowed a fun time instead of something boring.

What I see in my students who play these adventures is an increase in independence, initiative, problem-solving, creative thinking, the ability to find answers and solutions themselves, engagement, motivation and confidence.

Why Not?

There are unique challenges with using learning adventures. For team-based ones, many middle school students have gotten out of the habit of working collaboratively. There are unique classroom management challenges as students are being asked to work independently. Hopefully, with a well-written adventure, students get into the 'flow' zone and you'll have few issues. For the teacher, there is a lot of work up front in writing the adventure, but I can assure you this is time well spent.

What Next?

Grab yourself a curriculum, a list of skills and some activities. Combine them into a planning table or spreadsheet. Come up with a fun plot idea, or steal one from a book or movie, or generate a random one using an online generator. The work you put in up front will pay huge dividends in engagement and student outcomes. Students are more likely to learn something to advance the plot in a narrative than because 'the curriculum said so.' Giving students choice over a storyline in which they are the main character is a super-engaging way to learn. The kids told me so.

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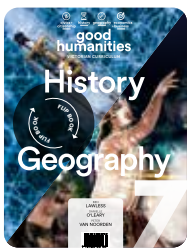

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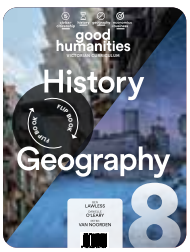

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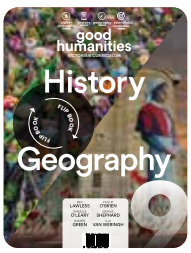

October 2020

BEN LAWLESS

"Working on these books helped me to realise a dream: a published text that puts the learner in the driver's seat!"

Contact **Katrina Tucker** for your **FREE** Good Humanities sample
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