

Lesson Title:

The Safest Time in History?

Subjects:

U. S. History, World History

Suggested time:

Three 50-minute class periods (this may need to be longer, depending on how in-depth students will examine this topic)

Grade Levels:

7-12

Essential Questions:

- Are humans aggressive by nature?
- Can civilizations become safe for all people?
- How can societies become more peaceful and safe?

Learning Target:

After examining the hypothesis that this time period is the safest time in human history, students will gather evidence to support or challenge this claim.

Overview:

Harvard professor of psychology Steven Pinker hypothesizes that we are living in the safest time in human history. Pinker explains his reasoning for this in his book *The Better Nature of Our Angels: How Violence Has Declined* (2011). At the “Why War: Causes of Conflict” exhibit in the Flying Heritage Collection, Pinker’s supporting evidence is presented in a graphic. The graphic shows five historical trends and four aspects of human nature to support his claim.

- Historical Trends:
 1. Commerce
 2. Rationality
 3. Understanding
 4. Feminization
 5. State
- Human Nature:
 1. Empathy
 2. Reason
 3. Morality
 4. Self-Control

In this activity, students will view Pinker’s hypothesis as an opportunity to engage in historical inquiry. They will explore several of the trends in history and aspects of human nature to help them gather evidence that either supports or challenges this claim. In the process, students will be able to learn about society and culture, and learn to think historically and develop critical inquiry skills.

Materials:

The attached handout (“More Peaceful Now?”) provides a general overview of Pinker’s hypothesis and the text of the display in the “Why War” exhibit.

In addition, Pinker presents his ideas during a TED talk that may be accessed at this site:

https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_on_the_myth_of_violence

This talk is accessible for young adults and teachers, but will be best used as teacher background information. Pinker’s book, *The Better Nature of Our Angels: How Violence Has Declined* (2011), also provides background information, but uses academic language that will make it inaccessible to most students—particularly ELLs. He updated his thinking about this in a 16-page document that is posted on his website:

http://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/has_the_decline_of_violence_reversed_since_the_better_angels_of_our_nature_was_written.pdf

A transcript from an interview Pinker did with National Public Radio (NPR) on this topic is available online here:

<http://www.npr.org/2016/07/16/486311030/despite-the-headlines-steven-pinker-says-the-world-is-becoming-less-violent>

A transcript from an interview Pinker did with Public Radio International (PRI) is available here:

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-29/world-actually-becoming-more-peaceful-believe-it-or-not>

The procedures below are a modification of the “inquiry arc” that the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) encourages as part of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. This will be a familiar process for your students, where they will engage in four steps:

- 1) Developing questions and planning inquiries;
- 2) Applying disciplinary concepts and tools;
- 3) Evaluating sources and using evidence;
- 4) Communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

For greater detail about this, the NCSS offers a large .pdf file here:

<http://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>

Starting on p. 12 may help focus your reading.

Procedure:

Warm-up: Ask students to think about safety today in their community, state, and country (i.e., the United States). On a scale of 1-10 — with 1 being peaceful and 10 being extremely violent —ask students to rank how peaceful or safe they believe the nation is today. After several students state and provide brief explanations of their numerical rankings, shift the conversation to international war, violence, and peace. Have students turn to a partner and share how peaceful the world is today compared to 100 years ago, 500 years ago, and since the start of human history.

Tell the class that they will be working on a historical inquiry project that tests a hypothesis that we are living during the safest time in human history. To help them with this, they will follow an “inquiry arc” that directs their research and thinking.

Step 1: Pinker’s Hypothesis

Project overhead the following hypothesis about our world, violence, war, and peace that is a summary of Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker’s research:

Violence has been in decline over the last thousand years, and we are currently living in the most peaceful time in the history of the human species.

Explain this to students by telling them that the support for this is that humans are motivated to have empathy, value self-control, develop morality, and use reason, and these move us away from violence and fighting and toward cooperation and peace. Pinker provides evidence to support his hypothesis.

Step 2: Developing questions and planning inquiries

Ask students to think critically about Pinker’s hypothesis, and to move beyond simply “agreeing” or “disagreeing” with the statement. In pairs, ask students to create a list of five sources of evidence that they believe are needed to support Pinker’s claim. For example, students may want to know how many wars have broken out in the last 100 years and compare that to the number of wars in the last 1000 years. As students work in pairs, guide them away from evaluating the hypotheses and toward thinking about the evidence needed to explore the hypothesis.

After 5 minutes, ask students to share one or two of the sources of evidence they identified.

Step 3: Historical Trends and Human Aspects

Distribute to each student the handout titled “More Peaceful Now?” that lists the five historical trends and four human aspects that Pinker suggests makes this time in history more peaceful. The first two paragraphs of this handout provide narrative descriptions to support Pinker’s hypothesis. You may want to read this out loud as students read along with you. Stop from time to time and clarify difficult words, or words that are not often used by students (also known as academic language). Reiterate that Pinker does not suggest we are in a time of peace worldwide or nationwide. He suggests that we are enjoying more peace than any other time in history.

Talk through the “More Peaceful Now?” handout by highlighting the main points:

The handout highlights five historical trends and four aspects of human nature to his claim.

- Historical Trends:
 1. Commerce
 2. Rationality
 3. Understanding
 4. Feminization
 5. State

- Human Nature:
 1. Empathy
 2. Reason
 3. Morality
 4. Self-Control

Step 3A: As students read each trend, have them consider how this trend in society/civilization supports Pinker’s hypothesis. However, have students also pose one question to highlight an area that does not make sense related to each trend. For example, for commerce, a supportive idea is that countries need to trade with others, so strong international commerce will promote peace. A question might be “If countries focus on making products at home (e.g., Made in the USA), then how might that hurt international commerce and lead to less commerce and international peace?”

Step 3B: Have students repeat this process for each of the four aspects of human nature. Again, ask them to identify one example that supports the peace hypothesis and one question that challenges the hypothesis. For example, empathy would promote peace because we understand others’ plights and perspectives better. A question might be “What evidence exists that suggests people are more empathetic than before?”

NOTE: This will be hard work for students, and require a lot of thinking. The focus of this time is to understand each historical trend and find evidence of that trend supporting and challenging the hypothesis about peace. Monitor students to determine if they are engaged. It might be helpful to have them work in pairs, keep changing partners to promote new thinking, share out to the entire class to expose everyone to broader thinking, etc.

Step 4: Evaluating sources and using evidence

At this point in the lesson, ask each student to consider the nine questions they wrote during Step 3 (one for each of the five trends in history and each of the four aspects of human nature), and then select three questions that they want to consider in more depth. Tell them that these questions will help them test Pinker’s hypothesis. Students are free to select any of their questions, or their classmates’ questions, but require them to have no more than two be from the “historical trends” section or the “human nature” section.

Students can work alone, or be paired with a partner who is asking similar questions. Ask students to consider what type of evidence they need to help answer their questions. Have them then begin the process of answering their questions by searching for answers online. Remind students that Pinker is suggesting a complex hypothesis, and that answers to their questions will not be easy or quick. Consider setting aside a class period in the computer lab to help them research at a time when you are available to help them.

To clarify the process for Step 4, consider this example. A student selects the following questions from her larger list:

- Rationality: Doesn’t anger prevent rational thought?
- State: Will a government use deadly force if it has it available?
- Morality: What happens if two groups have different morals?

Beginning to search for answers to these questions will allow for more in-depth thinking about each question. Based on these questions, for example, the student will begin to find out if war or violence is irrational, is the result of a “show of might/power,” or occurs between groups with opposing moral codes. Findings will be evidence that these questions are either refuted (because we are indeed safer today than in the past) or that they reveal doubt that the hypothesis is viable.

Step 5: Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

After searching for general answers, partner students in pairs (if they are working alone) or groups of four (if they are working in pairs) and share the results of their findings from Step 4. In these new groups have students answer the following question (put this on the board or overhead):

Were our ancestors less safe than we are today? Why/Why not?

Ask each group to come up with their answer to this question, citing at least four sources of evidence from their research on their questions, as well as from Pinker’s reasons behind his hypothesis. After the groups have had a chance to talk about this, ask each student to respond to either prompt A or prompt B below:

- A) We live in the safest time in human history for the following three reasons (provide evidence from your inquiry for each reason)...

- B) We do not live in the safest time in human history for the following three reasons (provide evidence from your inquiry for each reason)...

Extension Activity #1:

Handout to students the updated response by Pinker as why we are still safer today than our ancestors. The online site for this document is provided under “Materials” above, but is also located here:

http://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/has_the_decline_of_violence_reversed_since_the_better_angels_of_our_nature_was_written.pdf

Students can look at his graphs and by following the same process at Step 3 above they can challenge or accept the points Pinker makes. This document provides complex data, and students will need help with the academic language. It will be helpful to walk through the first two or three pages together.

Extension Activity #2:

When students tour the “Why War: The Causes of Conflict” exhibit at the Flying Heritage Collection, they will see a large graphic with Pinker’s ideas. Have students design a graphic that shows the five historical trends and the four aspects of human nature that Pinker suggest leads to safety and peace. When in the exhibit, they can then compare their graphic depiction of these nine elements with what was produced for the collection.

Language Support:

To aid those with limited English proficiency or others who need help with academic language, place them in groups with at least one student who speaks English as a first language. The

handout on risk factors can also be given to ELLs the day before this activity, and ELLs should be told which risk factor they will examine.

Standards:

Washington Standards (EALRs/GLEs)

8th Grade Social Studies

EALR GLE GLE Description

- History 4.3.1 Analyzes and interprets historical materials from a variety of perspectives in U.S. history (1776—1900).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes multiple causal factors to create positions on major events in U.S. history (1776 – 1900).

9th and 10th Grade Social Studies

EALR GLE GLE Description

- Civics 1.3.1 Analyzes the relationships and tensions between national interests and international issues in the world in the past or present.
- History 4.2.1 Analyzes how individuals and movements have shaped world history (1450—present).
- 4.2.3 Analyzes and evaluates how technology and ideas have shaped world history (1450—present).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes the multiple causal factors of conflicts in world history (1450 – present).
- 4.4.1 Analyzes how an understanding of world history can help us prevent problems today.

11th Grade Social Studies

EALR GLE GLE Description

- History 4.2.3 Analyzes and evaluates how technology and ideas have shaped U.S. history (1890— present).
- 4.3.1 Analyzes differing interpretations of events in U.S. history (1890—present).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes multiple causes of events in U.S. history, distinguishing between proximate and long-term causal factors (1890—present).
- 4.4.1 Analyzes how an understanding of United States history can help us prevent problems today.
- Skills 5.1.1 Analyzes the underlying assumptions of positions on an issue or event.

12 Grade Social Studies

EALR GLE GLE Description

- History 4.2.1 Evaluates how individuals and movements have shaped contemporary world issues.
- 4.2.2 Analyzes how cultural identity can promote unity and division.

Common Core State Standards:

Build Social Studies Literacy through Reading and Writing Common Core State Standard for ELA & Literacy in Social Studies Grades 9-10

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/9-10/>

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

Build Social Studies Literacy through Reading and Writing Common Core State Standard for ELA & Literacy in Social Studies Grades 11-12

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

NCSS C3 Framework (College, Career, and Civic Life)

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

Dimension 3: Argument Writing

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action