

The Great Depression

What can we learn from the Great Depression?

BY WENDY SMITH

The Great Depression
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Foreword

Inquiry-based learning is a major component of humanities teaching in Australia and abroad. The inquiry approach, which was first applied to the physical sciences, is based on the work of J.S. Bruner, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and others. It has been employed in various learning contexts by practitioners such as Joe Exline, Dan Apple, Cornelia Bruner and the Education Development Center.

The inquiry method is based on the proposition that learning should be structured around a series of relevant and targeted questions, sometimes developed in partnership, rather than the traditional method of a teacher (expert) imparting an established set of facts to students (recipients). Good inquiry questions will be intriguing for students and teachers alike.

In the History classroom, the opening lesson of an inquiry unit often centres on a curious image or item which students are asked to speculate upon. The teacher might ask questions like, ‘What do you think is going on here?’, ‘How long ago might this image have been created?’ and so on. After some initial hypotheses and discussions, the teacher might explain the origin and significance of the image, before introducing the main inquiry question. This is usually a broad, over-arching question that ‘frames’ the unit. This framing question (for our purposes, Inquiry Question 1) will be returned to throughout the study and completed in full at the end. The teacher also sets several other inquiry questions targeting specific points – these can usually be answered in one or two lessons.

As they go through the unit, students examine a set of historical sources. These sources, comprising documents, images, statistics, news clippings and artistic works, are used as evidence

with which to answer the inquiry questions. Through a range of enjoyable tasks, students respond creatively and form opinions of their own.

Inquiry units tend to encourage:

- curiosity
- imagination
- detective work
- interaction
- physical movement
- debate

They also foster skills such as:

- hypothesis
- research
- analysis
- synthesis
- understanding context and chronology
- forming and defending an argument

The most important part of the process, however, seems to be the sense of surprise and enthusiasm that is created when teacher and students set about solving a puzzle together.

I trust this series will give you many lively ideas for your History classroom.

Ingrid Purnell
Editor

The HTAV would like to thank Rosalie Triolo and Emily Board for their expertise and assistance in developing the Inquiry-Based Learning series.



Overview

What can we learn from the Great Depression?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 'Roaring Twenties' in America was a period of exceptional prosperity. It marked the beginning of the first consumer-oriented economy. Many complex factors stimulated the long boom, but the main ones are summarised below.

I) NEW TECHNOLOGIES

In a period of significant technological progress, factories became automated and adopted new scientific management techniques. The automobile industry made a particularly significant contribution to the boom. In 1912 a Model T Ford was selling for \$600 when average annual earnings were \$592. By 1924 a Model T could be bought for \$290 and average earnings had risen to \$1303. Related industries such as steel, rubber, glass, nickel and petroleum also boomed.

II) THE EMERGENCE OF NEW INDUSTRIES

The rapid growth in the electrification of homes during the decade stimulated demand for cookers, washing machines, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and other household appliances. For example, 5000 refrigerators were produced in 1921, while ten years later the figure had risen to over one-million.

III) MASS PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND ADVERTISING

Consumers marvelled at the array of new products surging on to the market. The popular expression 'Whatever will they think of next?' dates from the 1920s. The adoption of the assembly line and other mass-production techniques, pioneered by Henry Ford, reduced

manufacturing costs dramatically and made the new products affordable. The new mass-market prompted the development of innovative advertising techniques – the use of brand names, celebrity endorsements and catchy slogans. In 1927 General Motors introduced the idea of a yearly model change to convince motorists to trade in their 'old' cars.

IV) BUYING ON CREDIT

The consumer boom was greatly aided by new forms of credit. About sixty per cent of all furniture and seventy-five per cent of all radios were purchased on installment plans, as well as the majority of cars. Banks actively encouraged consumers to borrow: to buy homes, cars and shares.

V) GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Presidents from the Republican Party were in power in the US from 1921 to 1933. The Republicans tend to follow a 'laissez faire' approach to economics, whereby the government plays a limited, rather than an interventionist, role in the economy. Tax levels were low and this stimulated both consumer spending and business investment.

VI) CONFIDENCE

America had become conspicuously wealthy. Many workers and businesspeople could see no reason why the boom should not continue indefinitely – and spent accordingly. The popular image of the 1920s is one of prosperity and wild living, of bootleggers and gangsters, liberated 'flappers' with their short skirts and boyish haircuts. The 1920s was also one of the most innovative and creative periods in American history. Mass entertainment added to a sense of



Inquiry Question 1

What can we learn from the Great Depression?

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY: BACK FROM THE WAR

1. Distribute Sources 1 and 2.
2. Ask for volunteers to read the poems to the class. Tell the students they are going to play the role of detectives and draw some tentative hypotheses from the two pieces of evidence, one of which was written by a World War I soldier on his return, the other by the Australian poet C.J. Dennis.
3. Ask the class to suggest some questions to assist in their interpretation and write these on the board. For example:
 - Which war/wars are the two poets writing about?
 - Which poet is writing from his own experience?
 - Why might the poets have produced these poems?
 - How reliable might memories of wartime be?
4. Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Give the students 15 minutes to study the two poems and formulate speculative responses to the questions.
5. Still in groups, students draw a Venn diagram demonstrating the similarities and differences between the two poems and/or writers.
6. The responses to the first task are shared with the class: students explain their interpretations of the evidence and respond to alternative viewpoints. Students report back on the similarities and differences between the poems/writers: summarise these on the board.
7. Discuss as a class some key points relevant to this unit, such as:
 - The wounded man's independent spirit, his rejection of charity, and his overwhelming desire for a job, despite his severe handicap
 - If people were unemployed, why might it have been seen as their fault? (e.g. 'a helpless slob')
 - What assistance was given to returning soldiers?
 - What are some causes of unemployment today?
 - Apart from the income earned, why is employment so important to people?



ACTIVITY 1: BOOM AND BUST

1. Write Inquiry Question 1 on the board. Students, working in pairs, discuss and note what they know about the terms 'boom' and 'bust' and the Great Depression.
2. Display Sources 3 and 4 on the board using a projector.
3. Explain that most economies go through cycles of boom and recession and, occasionally, depression. Students working in pairs examine both charts and draw some tentative conclusions about the economic cycle. For example:
 - cycles vary in length and intensity
 - post-war periods tend to boom
 - unemployment rises during recessions and falls during a boom
 - the Great Depression was more severe than other downturns
 - GDP (a nation's output of goods and services) falls during recession and depression.
4. As a class students share their answers. Ask the class what they will need to find out and understand about economic cycles in order to answer Inquiry Question 1.
5. In pairs or small groups, students speculate about the factors that influence the cycle and think about:
 - Why do booms occur after wars?
 - Why don't booms/downturns last for ever?
 - Why was the Great Depression more severe than other downturns?
6. Discuss answers as a group. Points that might arise:
 - wartime shortages create a pent-up demand for goods and services; confidence returns and consumers and businesses increase their spending
 - Governments can take action to reduce unemployment during a depression.
7. Show Source 5. Questions:
 - Was this photo likely to have been taken during a boom or recession?
 - What words could summarise the image?
 - Discuss the link between the image and job creation by asking students to answer the question 'What happens next?' i.e. after the spending spree.
8. Write on board: Consumer spending and business confidence (heading):

Consumer spending spree ⇒ Increased sales in shops ⇒ Profits and business confidence rise ⇒ More sales staff hired ⇒ Unemployment falls ⇒ New employees have more money to spend and feel more confident about the future ⇒ *(and so the cycle continues until confidence falls)*.

ACTIVITY 2: FACT BANK

Devote 1–2 pages of your workbook to a Fact Bank. This is where you will jot down facts, as you go through the unit, which will eventually help you to answer Inquiry Question 1 (What can we learn from the Great Depression?)

Make three notes in your Fact Bank from today's lesson.



Sources

Distribute these sources to your class as required. You may photocopy from this booklet, or print directly from the CD provided.

Sample pages



SOURCE 1

Poem by a war veteran.

The wounded man speaks

by H. Open

*I left an ear in a dug-out
When a shell hit made us dance
And at Belleau Wood where mixing was good
I gave up a mitt [hand] for France ...
They certainly spoiled my beauty
And my leg is a twisted curse
They busted me up like a mangled pup
But — THEY DID NOT BUST MY NERVE
And no pussy-footing sissy
Shall grab my one good hand ...
Just to make himself feel grand
For I'm damned if I'll be a hero
And I ain't a helpless slob
After what I've stood, what is left is good
And all I want is — A JOB*

H. Open, 'The Wounded Man Speaks' in *Repatriation*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1919), 17.



SOURCE 28

Beach-goers, 1935.



Sample pages

Mr J. Prentice and Miss J. Howat doing acrobatics, Bondi Beach. Photographed by Ted Hood, 1935. Dixon Galleries, State Library of NSW.