Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?

Project Directors
John Lee, North Carolina State University
Kathy Swan, University of Kentucky
SG Grant, Binghamton University

Project Writers
Lauren Colley
Stephen Day
Rebecca Muller
Emma Thacker

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Design by Macklin Frazier

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College, Career & Civic Life

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Module at a Glance

Compelling Question

Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?

Supporting Question 1
What did Frederick Law Olmsted think parks should be for?

Formative Performance Task I
Outline Olmsted’s theories of landscape architecture using his words and photographs of his parks.

Historical Sources
A. Excerpt from Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889 (with photographs)
B. Excerpt from Olmsted, letter to New York City Board of Commissioners, 1858.
C. Excerpt from “Olmsted - His Essential Theory” by Charles E. Beveridge

Supporting Question 2
How did Olmsted think his parks would improve people’s lives?

Formative Performance Task II
Develop a claim about Olmsted’s theory of park development and list evidence in support of the claim.

Historical Sources
A. Excerpt from report on design for Franklin Park, 1886 (with photographs)
B. Excerpt from Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865

Supporting Question 3
What are the pluses and minuses of Olmsted’s designs?

Formative Performance Task III
Make arguments in support and against Olmsted’s approach to park design.

Historical Sources
A. Excerpt from letter to Rudolph Ulrich, March 24, 1894 (with photographs)
B. Excerpt from letter to Charles S. Sargent, August, 1891 (with photographs)
C. Excerpt from Report on design for Prospect Park, 1866 (with photographs)

Summative Performance Task: Town Hall Presentation

Do our parks do what they are supposed to? The question requires students to analyze the beliefs and designs of a foundational American landscape architect and evaluate their relevant relevance. Based on their inquiry and evaluation, students should create a presentation that seeks to persuade a local parks and recreation department to either renovate or preserve a local park.
Overview

This module integrates skills from the Common Core History/Social Studies 9-12 reading and writing standards and C3 Framework indicators into social studies instruction. It draws upon historical sources from the Library of Congress and culminates in a town hall debate or presentation. The instructional ideas in this module follow the Literacy Design Collaborative task-based approach. By completing this module, students will build their social studies content knowledge as well as their reading, writing, and inquiry skills.

This document includes information to support teachers as they implement the instructional ideas in their classroom. The full instructional module should take 90-120 minutes. The module gives significant guidance with respect to the questioning that teachers can use. However, teachers should make the decision as to how to best present these questions, depending on the specific classroom context. For example, the questions and sources can be used as is or teachers could have students develop their own question as a replacement or in addition to the sources provided.

The module includes the following components:

• Compelling Question / Background
• Supporting Questions and Formative Performance Tasks
• Summative Performance Tasks

In addition, this module includes photographs and the excerpts from historical sources needed for the lesson and listing of specific tool for historical thinking.

In some cases, particularly with the longer excerpts related to Supporting Question 2, the teacher may need to plan ways to help students with unfamiliar vocabulary.

The Compelling Question

One of the great things about a compelling inquiry question is that it can call students’ attention to aspects of life that they have always taken for granted. “Do our parks do what they are supposed to do?” may elicit bemused frowns and, we hope, the counter-question “well, who is to say what a park is actually supposed to do?”

To Fredrick Law Olmsted, the father of American public park design, the answer was very clear: to serve and to civilize the public. This is summed up in his famous slogan, “service must precede art.” Olmsted was one of many Gilded Age thinkers and philanthropists who were actively concerned with social issues. To them, the masses of workers were in danger of toiling away their lives in factories and polluted cities, never to enjoy the benefits of a natural and intelligent human existence. It was in the spirit of American republicanism to preserve public spaces that would act as safe places for all people, rich and poor. For this reason, parks should be places that reflected natural beauty, not faddish spectacles. The eye should not be attracted to any one thing, but rather should be led to take in the totality of the space. One should not even notice what was refreshing about a park; it should have the same effect as nature itself, enveloping one in to an entire experience.

However, there are some aspects of the Gilded Age mindset that may clash with the modern. Olmsted, like many of his contemporaries, saw the poor masses as deprived and uncivilized. His parks reflected what he saw as a need to develop and civilize them, but not necessarily to give them what they want. You will not see swing sets or baseball diamonds in an Olmsted park. Designers following his theories sometimes felt that these might lead simply to cheap excitement rather than a development of appreciation for beauty. More importantly, the idea that the working classes are culturally deprived can be seen as condescending.

For more background information on elements of Olmsted’s designs (for either teacher or student use), see www.Olmsted.org.

Begin the lesson by posing the compelling question. Teachers might want to lead students to the question or have them consider why the question is important. After posing the compelling question, teachers might ask students for their gut reaction to the question. The following questions can be used to expand this initial discussion.

• What sorts of things are in your local park?
• What do people use the park for?
• Do you feel that people put your park to good use?
Common Core and C3 Framework connections

All ten Common Core reading standards are potentially relevant for students’ work. Since this module makes use of text and photographs, Common Core Reading Standard 9 is particularly important given that it asks students to compare what they can learn from text to what is communicated through other mediums.

As they write, teachers can target specific skills to assess students’ progress and support them as they practice the skills. The Common Core and the C3 Framework call on students to use evidence when making arguments. Supporting Question 2 is specifically focused on using evidence.

The C3 Framework also calls on students to adapt arguments. The summative performance task provides students an opportunity to practice this skill.

Supporting Question and Formative Performance Tasks

The supporting questions for this module stage a series of exercises that provide students with an opportunity to examine Olmsted’s theory about how parks should function. Olmsted had very clear beliefs about parks, and supporting question #1 asks students to examine these views. Supporting question #2 digs into the topic a bit deeper by prompting students to think about how Olmsted thought parks would actually function in society to improve people’s lives. Supporting question #3 also focuses on Olmsted’s theory, but adds counter-perspectives by encouraging students to consider both the potential benefits of his design and possible drawbacks. All three supporting questions make use of personal correspondence and photographs of Olmsted’s work.

Supporting Question and Formative Performance Task #1

What did Frederick Olmsted think parks should be for?

With this supporting question, the teacher draws students’ attention to the notion that there are theories as to how a park “ought” to be designed. Teachers should introduce Olmsted to students by noting that he designed many of America’s most important parks, including Central Park in New York City, and that he was extremely influential in affecting how parks were built throughout the last half of the 19th century.

The sources included with this supporting question include a short excerpt from an Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt on July 12, 1889 regarding Olmsted’s design of the Biltmore estate in Asheville, North Carolina. Accompanying the text are two photographs of the estate. One, showing Olmsted’s design of the road leading to the Biltmore, and the other of the Biltmore grounds. Additional sources include an Olmsted letter excerpt from 40 years prior to his work on the Biltmore and a short passage from an essay by Charles E. Beveridge. Taken together, these sources gently present Olmsted’s theory of park design.

The formative performance task is to outline Olmsted’s theories of landscape architecture using his words and photographs of his parks. Teachers can support students’ as they develop this outline by having them analyze the three sources using the following prompts. These prompts are designed to help student sketch a theory about Olmsted.

• Read Olmsted’s letter to Vanderbilt and look at the Approach Road to the Biltmore Estate. The road is about a mile long. How would you describe this road? (Possible answers: It’s long, winding, rugged, narrow, or natural).
• Now look at the photograph of the Biltmore grounds. Is this an appropriate driveway for such a magnificent house? (Possible answers: Yes, it provides contrast and connects you with nature; or No, it seems like play-acting or being fake)
• What did Olmsted mean by “service must precede art?” What did he mean by “service?” (Possible answers: it is immoral to use valuable (public?) resources for something that has no use. Art should be used to uplift people, and that includes meeting their needs)
• Do you agree with Olmsted? Does it matter if art “serves?”

Supporting Question and Formative Performance Task #2

What did Frederick Olmsted mean by “service must precede art?” What did he mean by “service?” What did he mean by “serve?”
Supporting Question and Formative Performance Task #2

How did Olmsted think his parks could improve people’s lives?

In thinking whether Olmsted’s theories are relevant to today, we have the opportunity to consider both his historical context and ours. The Gilded Age was a time of great social awareness. Olmsted shared the common belief that society had a duty to help the struggling masses of workers achieve a better life. Like other industrialists and philanthropists of the time such as Vanderbilt and Carnegie, Olmsted believed in the importance of literature and art for the education of the people. While they constructed libraries and galleries as their program of social uplift, Olmsted believed that it was the government’s duty to set aside public land for the creation of public parks.

The parks were not to be places for fun and low entertainment. They were for contemplation of beauty.

The formative performance task for this supporting question is to develop a claim about Olmsted’s theory of park development and list evidence from the sources in support of the claim. Use the Library of Congress primary source analysis tool to support students as they analyze sources and develop this claim (www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources).

The sources for this supporting question include an 1865 Olmsted report on Yosemite and Big Tree Grove in California and an 1886 report from Olmsted on his design of Boston’s Franklin Park. These sources lay out Olmsted’s thinking about how people could improve their health and mental condition by interacting with nature. Olmsted’s argument was consistent and focused. Have students pose a claim about Olmsted’s thinking about the role of parks in improving the human condition.

Once the claim has been stated, students can make a list of Olmsted quotes that support the claim. By doing so, students will be able to both support and potentially reject Olmsted’s theory. To enable thinking on both sides have students pose a counterclaim. Students might also locate evidence that would support their counterclaim.

Supporting Question and Formative Performance Task #3

What are the pluses and minuses of Olmsted’s designs?

Through an examination of this question, students begin to delve into the more subtle aspects of Olmsted’s designs. The sources provided for this question include a set of four photographs accompanied by three brief excerpts from Olmsted letters and a report on the development of Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

The formative performance task is for students to make arguments in support and against Olmsted’s approach to park design. One approach to organizing the analysis of these sources is to pair students and have them take opposing positions on Olmsted’s theory – one in support and one arguing against his theory.

Here are some questions that teachers can use to guide students in developing their arguments.

• Why might Olmsted think that river banks should be “crowded with vegetation?” Is that a good idea or a bad idea? What is gained and what is lost by planting the river bank?

• Why does Olmsted think that “craggy” stones make the trees (“foliage”) look better? How is this similar to his thoughts about “the Approach Road” from the Biltmore Estate? How is it similar to the untended river banks? Is the use of craggy stones a good idea or a bad idea?
Summative Performance Task

In this summative task, students will address the question; Do our parks do what they are supposed to? The question requires students to analyze the beliefs and designs of Olmsted as a foundational American landscape architect and evaluate his relevance. Based on their inquiry and evaluation, students should create a presentation that seeks to persuade a local parks and recreation department to either renovate or preserve a local park.

Situating the task in the context of a local debate can enhance this summative task. Teachers should seek out a local or regional park that has been in the news or that might be the subject of some debate about its design.

Teachers should have students write a brief arguing for a particular design to be implemented in the selected park. Students should draw on Olmsted’s ideas, either in support or in opposition, as evidence to support their claims about how their local park should be designed.

Scoring Rubric for Argumentative Essay

The following criteria and rubric can be used to determine the quality of students’ work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Under Developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Argument focuses clearly and completely on the task, purpose, and audience.</td>
<td>Argument includes attention regarding task, purpose, and audience.</td>
<td>Argument lacks task, purpose, and audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherent</td>
<td>Argument regularly uses precise and knowledgeable claims.</td>
<td>Argument includes precise and knowledgeable claims.</td>
<td>Argument lacks precise and knowledgeable claims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convincing</td>
<td>Argument regularly uses facts and concrete details from the source.</td>
<td>Argument is supported by facts and concrete details from the source.</td>
<td>Argument misuses or does not include facts and concrete details from the source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft</td>
<td>Argument regularly utilizes inferences, claims, and evidence.</td>
<td>Argument offers some limited inferences, claims, and evidence.</td>
<td>Argument does not include inferences, claims, and evidence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Excerpt from Olmsted letter to George W. Vanderbilt, July 12, 1889

“I suggest that the most striking and pleasing impression will be obtained if an approach can be made that shall have throughout a natural and comparatively wild and secluded character; its borders rich with the varied forms of vegetation, and with incidents growing out of the vicinity of springs and streams and pools, steep banks and rocks, all consistent with the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest.”

Supporting Question 1 - Source B

Excerpt from Olmsted, letter to New York City Board of Commissioners, 1858

It is one great purpose of the Park to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God’s handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month of two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.


Supporting Question 1 - Source C

Excerpt from Olmsted—His Essential Theory by Charles E. Beveridge

Service must precede art. ... All turf, trees, flowers, fences, walks, water, paint, plaster, posts and pillars in which there is not a purpose of direct [usefulness] or service are inartistic, [and maybe] barbarous. … So long as considerations of [usefulness] are neglected or overridden by considerations of ornament, there will be no true art.

The urban elegance generally desired in a small public or private pleasure ground is to be methodically guarded against. Turf, for example, is to be in most parts preferred as kept short by sheep, rather than lawn mowers; well known and long tried trees and bushes to rare ones; natives to exotics; humble field flowers to high bred marvels; plain green leaves to the blotched, spotted and fretted leaves for which, in decorative gardening, there is now a passing fashion.
Excerpt from Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865

It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered them... The lack of such occasional recreation where men and women are habitually pressed by their business or household cares often results in a class of disorders the characteristic quality of which is mental disability, sometimes taking the severe forms of softening of the brain, paralysis, palsey, monomania, or insanity, but more frequently of mental and nervous excitability, moroseness, melancholy, or irascibility, incapacitating the subject for the proper exercise of the intellectual and moral forces...

...The severe and excessive exercise of the mind which leads to the greatest fatigue...is almost entirely caused by [thinking about] the future...; to the laying up of wealth, to the preparation of something, to accomplishing something in the mind of another, and especially to small and petty details which are uninteresting in themselves and which engage the attention at all only because of the bearing they have on some general end of more importance which is seen ahead.

In the interest which natural scenery inspires there is the strongest contrast to this. It is for itself and at the moment it is enjoyed. The attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without ... thought or perception to some future end.

The enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes ... is thus a monopoly of a very few very rich people. The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it. ... Private parks can never be used by the mass of the people in any country nor by any considerable number even of the rich....Thus without means are taken by government to withhold them from the grasp of individuals, all places favorable in scenery to the recreation of the mind and body will be closed against the great body of the people....The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people under certain circumstances, is thus justified and enforced as a political duty.
The thing is to make it appear that we found this body of water and its shores and have done nothing to them except at the landings and bridges. They were rich, rank, luxurious, crowded with vegetation, like the banks of some tropical rivers that I have seen on Louisiana bayous.

Excerpt from letter to Charles S. Sargent, August, 1891

…the beauty of the designed sheets of foliage is thought to be better exhibited, and to have a more natural effect, when thus disposed over a backing of rough and deeply crannied, rather than of flat and dressed, stone.
It is under similar conditions to these that we find in nature that class of scenery...which is termed pastoral. It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.

The Long Meadow in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Photograph courtesy of National Park Service, Olmsted National Historic Site.
To successfully complete these modules, students must think like a historian, but that does not always come easily to students. Several resources exist that can support students as they analyze documents and develop their ability to think historically. While this is not an exhaustive list, consider using the following as you implement these modules.

In “What Does it Mean to Think Historically?” Andrews and Burke (2007) outline what they call the Five C’s of Historical Thinking: Change over Time, Context, Causality, Contingency, and Complexity. The goal of the Five C’s is to give students and teachers a glimpse into how historians think. Furthermore, Andrews and Burke (2007) provide examples of how these Five C’s might be implemented in authentic and meaningful ways in modern classrooms. (http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2007/0701/0701tea2.cfm)

**Library of Congress:** Provides teacher and student tools both for general analysis and the analysis of specific types of sources (e.g. photographs and prints, maps, sound recordings). Also provides guidance for teachers on how to use primary sources in the classroom. (http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources)

**National Archives - Docs Teach:** Similar to the Library of Congress, provides suggestions for integrating primary sources into the classroom along with tools to help students analyze specific types of sources. (http://docsteach.org)

**SCIM-C:** Provides a structure for interpreting historical sources that asks students to Summarize, Contextualize, Infer, Monitor, and Corroborate and demonstrates the SCIM-C process with three example sources. (http://www.historicalinquiry.com/)

**DBQ-Project:** Provides a process for students to read and analyze sources as they prepare to write an essay answering a document-based question. The DBQ Project has curriculum for both middle school and high school students but could be adapted for other levels as well. (http://www.dbqproject.com)

**Historical Thinking Project:** The historical thinking project provides tools for analyzing primary sources and discusses six historical thinking concepts: historical significance, cause & consequence, historical perspective-taking, continuity and change, the use of primary source evidence, and the ethical dimension of history. (http://historicalthinking.ca)

In addition, there is a wealth of books written with the idea of using historical inquiry with students, using primary sources to teach history. These are definitely worth a look:


