Exploring the Articles of Confederation States Role-Play
November 15, 2013
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Class: US History I

Background:
My students have studied the American Revolution for the past two weeks and today we are moving on to the next phase of American history: the brief, awkward phase between the end of the Revolution and the ratification of the Constitution. The national government at this time was set up under the Articles of Confederation. It was deliberately made weak by its crafters, who after experiencing oppressive government under the British were wary of centralized power of any kind. But this approach to government had flaws, too. The basic problem with the Articles was that gave the national government important responsibilities relating to national defense and "general welfare" but did not give the new national government any power to collect taxes or form an army. This created a situation in which the states’ goodwill toward one another was tested and self-interest often won the day. Students will develop an understanding of the problems posed by having such a loose confederacy as a form of government by taking on the roles of different states and choosing how to respond to historical scenarios from their state's perspective. What the will likely find is that by leaving so much of the government's duties to the whim and goodwill of the individual states, the Articles of the Confederation led to chaos and political gridlock, thus inspiring notions of a newer, stronger federal government.

Round Focus:
The success of this activity hinges on students grappling with the decisions that the states had to make and being willing and able to make assertions about what the states would do. They will be given some background information and geography of their states and their land, but will have to make their own inferences about how they think that their state should act. I am not as much concerned with them coming up with the "right" answer for what they should do as I am with them thinking about the scenarios that they are presented with and asserting an answer that they can back up.

The core theme of this lesson is self-interest versus the common good. We will initially get at this theme through a simple starter question that ask students to decide by consensus what kind of pizza is their favorite. This theme will run throughout the class as we begin the simulation of the United States under the Articles. If students come up with decisions for their states and compare them to other groups, they will find that not every other state shares their same interests. The interests of New England, for example, are quite different from those of South Carolina. At the same time that students are learning about historical events and circumstances from the time period, they will also have to contemplate the role of government in resolving the issue of self-interest and the common with regard to states, thus providing historical and thematic context for the development of the U.S. Constitution. Here is what I’d like you to look for as you observe this round:

1. Are students discussing the scenarios among themselves? Are they debating which option is best? Perhaps most importantly, are they “buying in” to the lesson and thinking and acting as if they have a real stake in what happens?

How do you know? (more space on other side)
2. Do the students feel confident and informed enough to infer what their state might want to do in each scenario? Are a variety of student voices being heard in each group?

3. Do the students seem to have a grasp on the larger issue of self-interest versus the common good by the end of the class? Please give any evidence that you have to support.

4. What does the class feel like? Does it seem to work as a learning environment? Do students seem to be engaged and thinking about the material? How do you know?

5. Please write down any other interesting or relevant quotes that you heard from the students during the class in the space below.