

# The Notables: Making Significant Historical Personalities Come Alive

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The study of significant people in history can be an engaging, meaningful, and integrated learning experience for upper primary school students. In this article I describe a project, The Notables, which immersed my Grade 4 students in a series of social studies and language arts activities designed to help them understand the concept of significance, learn about historical people and events, and develop important research and presentation skills.

In the study of history, key historical concepts such as significance, causation, continuity and change, and evidence are “essential to historical enquiry, the generation of hypotheses, and the *appropriate* selection, deployment and organization of historical details” (Ashby & Edwards, 2010, p. 35). These concepts are “tools for doing history, for thinking historically” (Seixas, 2010, p. 16). This means that helping young students understand the concept of significance can help them learn about the past. It can help them structure their learning to fully appreciate the role and contributions of key figures in history.

The Notables project uses the concept of significance to integrate language arts curriculum objectives (e.g., developing nonfiction reading skills, research skills, and presentation skills) with key primary social studies objectives, such as students being able to organize information, convey information for particular purposes and audiences, and appreciate the importance of key groups and individuals in their communities (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2008). The concept of significance helps students focus their reading and research, organize information, and understand the role key people have played in

their history.

The Notables has been adapted and used successfully with primary students ages 8-12 years old in various international schools. The activities described in this article were implemented with 9-10 year old students at the Singapore American School but can be modified to fit in any curriculum that requires students to learn about historical figures.

## Activating Students’ Ideas about Significant Figures

To teach the concept of significance it is first important to activate and engage ideas students may have about why some people are considered important to study and learn about in history (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Later, they can build on this knowledge by learning and applying criteria to help them evaluate whether certain people are significant and worthy of historical study.

To explore students’ initial ideas about significance, I have them consider the following questions:

- Who has been a significant (or important) person in your life?
- Who are the 3 significant people in history?
- What makes the people you have identified significant?
- How would you define significance?

Students also complete a timeline of their life to help them think about significant “milestones” in their development (see Figure

1: Timeline Activity). The purpose of this activity is to encourage students to think about significant markers in their life and why those might be considered noteworthy. This activity also requires them to interview family

members to help them consider these points in their young lives and to create “All About Me” posters that highlight some of these significant milestones.

Figure 1: Timeline Activity

**Timeline of Own Life**

My Milestones in Life by: \_\_\_\_\_

Milestone: 1 : a stone serving as a **milepost** 2 : an important or significant point in development

A milestone is an important event in someone's life. A milestone could be learning to walk, starting school, learning to ride a bike, the birth of a baby sister or brother, or moving to a new country.

What are the milestones in your life?

Age:

0 \_\_\_\_\_

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

6 \_\_\_\_\_

7 \_\_\_\_\_

8 \_\_\_\_\_

9 \_\_\_\_\_

10 \_\_\_\_\_

You will take this information and make a timeline in class to show the important milestones in your life. We will add small photos, clip art or drawings to show these events.

From these activities, we then consider other figures that students consider significant. Students will often name sports figures and athletes, current pop stars, political leaders, movie stars, and even family members. This allows for a discussion about what really makes someone significant. For example, students may think the pop star Justin Bieber is a significant figure but may have some difficulty explaining why or being able to make a convincing case for his significance. This is where criteria and a more sophisticated notion of significance can be introduced to get them to fully consider what makes certain people worthy of study.

### Defining Significance and Criteria for Significance

The concept of significance has individual meaning for all of us, but since it is a key history and social studies concept it should be defined with specific criteria that can be used to guide and structure students' work. This can be done together with students with everyone agreeing to and having a sense of ownership of the criteria. Here is how the process “unfolds” in my classroom.

Together we discuss what they think

makes the people they have listed in the above activities significant. In small groups students come up with 3-4 statements to describe why these people are significant. They then share these statements with the class. To help them consider criteria that the whole class might use to determine significance we refer to dictionary definitions of significance. For example, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary for Students at Word Central (<http://www.wordcentral.com>) defines significance as: “the quality of being of notable worth or influence” and lists importance as a synonym.

Since dictionary definitions, such as this one, may still be vague for students, I share with my students characteristics used by Peter Seixas. Using Seixas’ (2006) criteria, a significant person has:

- made a deep and important contribution or change
- affected a large number of people
- had a lasting effect over a long period of time

A significant person’s life may also help us understand something important about the past or shed light on issues or problems that concerns us today. For example, Seixas (1996) notes that the historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1990) made the life of Martha Ballard, an 18<sup>th</sup> century midwife in a small town in Maine, a significant figure because she was able to demonstrate how Ballard’s life shed light on important social patterns and issues of that period. Historians, then, demonstrate the ways individuals are significant because of the contributions they made, the changes they helped bring about, or the impact they had. They also help us make “connections between historical events and issues of concern in our own time” (Seixas, 1996, p. 769).

As a whole class we “unpack” these criteria to help students consider what might constitute an important contribution, a lasting effect over a long period of time, and how studying someone’s life in the past might help

us understand something important about the past or the present. We post the definition and criteria of significance in the classroom for all students to reference as they work through the next step of choosing a significant or notable person. We then “test” these criteria by applying them to a range of contemporary figures that students are familiar with by asking, “Which ones meet the criteria? Which ones do not? Why or why not?” For example, we might discuss whether the Formula One racer Lewis Hamilton and the boxer Muhammad Ali are historically significant figures (a case for Muhammad Ali as a significant historical figure can be made) or whether the pop singer Justin Bieber or Elvis Presley are more likely to be considered significant (Elvis, yes; Justin, no).

### **Choosing a Significant Notable Character to Research**

Over the next couple of days students are asked to generate a list of possible significant Notable character names that they think meet the criteria, through prior study or research, by asking parents, or from the news. As a whole class we discuss and record the “approved” Notable names on a chart and organize them into categories (e.g., people who have made contributions or lasting impact in politics, the arts, economic life, by bringing about social change, etc.).

Using this class chart, students then write down their first, second, and third Notable character choices. I typically require each student to have a different Notable to provide more variety and learning opportunities in the classroom. There are always plenty of Notables to go around - while teaching 5<sup>th</sup> grade one year, there were 217 different Notables represented as the entire grade level participated in this project! Giving the students their first choice is the goal, but in the event of duplication I interview each student individually about why he or she chose the character to help make the best decision. Usually they are not too disappointed to take their second or third choice.

Each year at least one student puts forth a

Notable character that fits the defined criteria, yet is not necessarily a good role model, or person of “character” that you would want your students to learn about at their particular age. For example, you may want to steer students away from choosing infamous, albeit significant, figures such as Hitler, Tojo, or Saddam Hussein. One way to do this is to add a “P.G. rating” of significance to the list: the person’s life should have more of a positive, rather than negative, effect on others.

At least one student each year also makes a case for one of their family members being a Notable character. When asked to defend the family member’s characteristics against the established criteria, most family members don’t pass the test. Also, there are usually not enough resource materials available for researching the family figure. And as a teacher it is a relief that the criteria list takes the

“blame” for their mom, dad, grandpa, or uncle not making it as a Notable!

And then came Lt. General Willie Florendo, grandfather of one of my students. This man, an important figure in Philippine history, not only fit all of the criteria listed, but was the first example of a living resource that could be used in the research process. Along with numerous articles and published books about Florendo, the grandfather and granddaughter wrote countless emails back and forth as a primary source of information for her research paper. The motivation to research and my student’s excitement with each email received proved to be a powerful, touching, and meaningful experience for all of us. Grandfather was even able to send original artifacts, such as his hat, name patches, books, plaques, for his granddaughter to use in her presentation (see Figure 2: Notables Photos).

Figure 2: Notables Photos



Example of artifacts Lt. Gen. Willie Florendo sent for the Notables presentation.



Finished Notables project:  
Backdrop with photos, timeline,  
original quotes, symbols, and  
significant contributions.

### **Making Connections to Singapore Social Studies Curriculum**

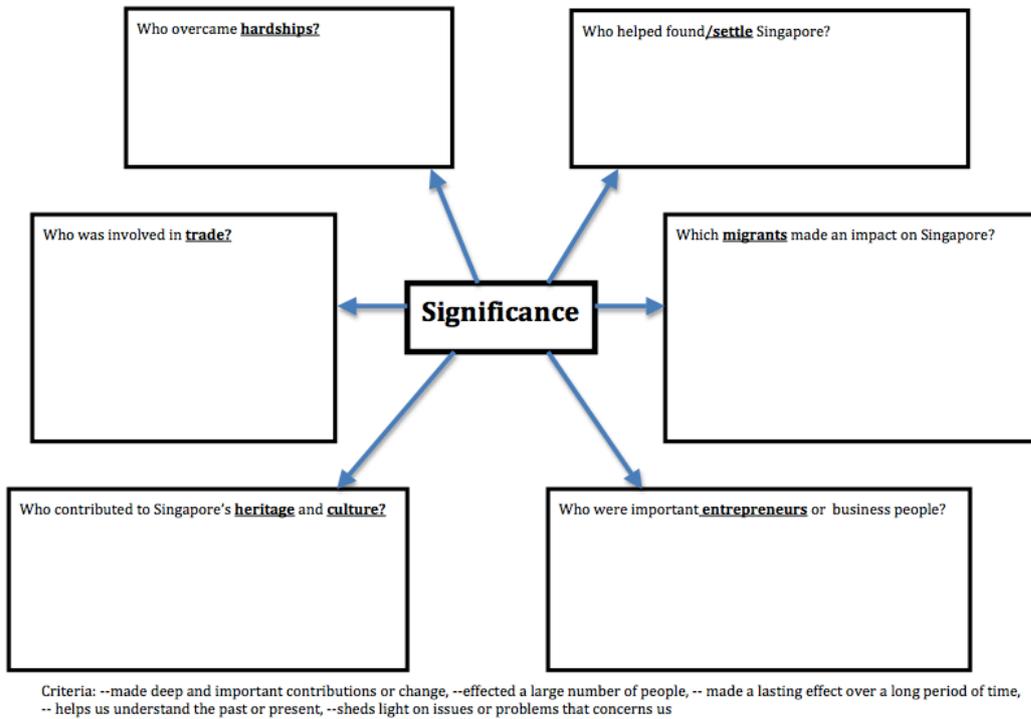
The Notables project also supports important curricular goals highlighted in the primary Singapore social studies syllabus. In the Primary 4 and Primary 5 Social Studies curriculum, the Notables project could be a motivating way for students to learn in depth about significant people in Singapore's history. In the Primary 4 curriculum, students are expected to study early migrants, people who help found and settle Singapore, important entrepreneurs and business people, and people who contributed to Singapore's heritage and culture. In the Primary 5 curriculum, students study people who were important leaders in building the nation of Singapore, people who helped Singapore develop economically, important war heroes, and those who contributed to Singapore's heritage and culture to build a Singaporean

identity.

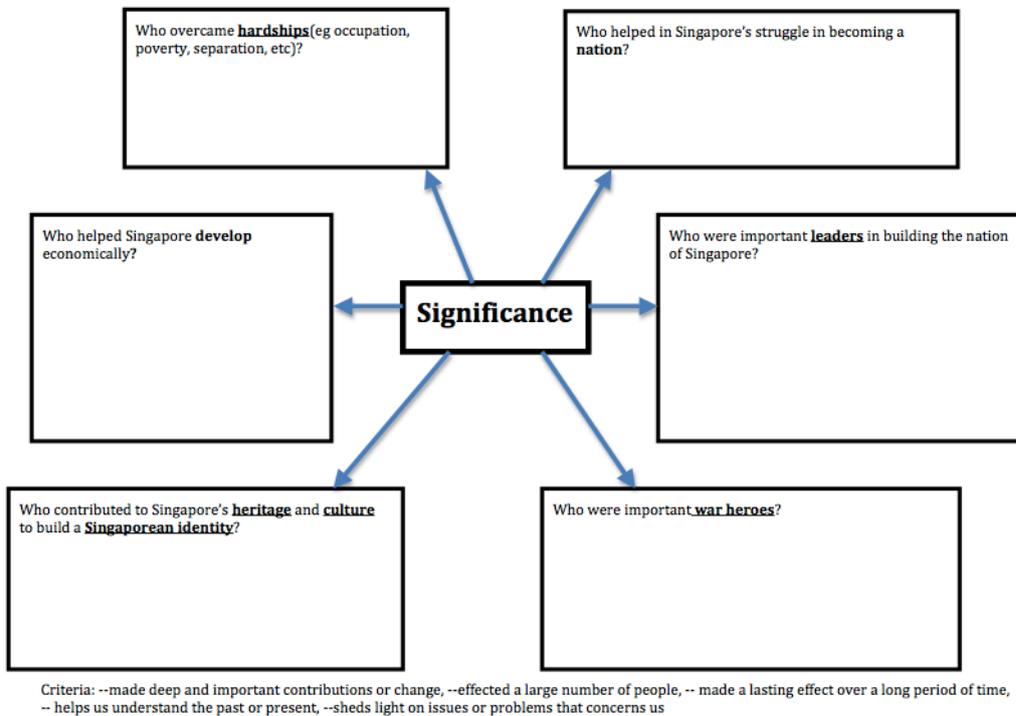
To identify notable figures in the Primary 4 and 5 syllabuses, teachers can use the diagrams in Figure 3. These diagrams can be used to help plan the range of significant figures included in the curriculum, as well as those who are not. As Segall (2012) noted in the previous issue of *HSSE Online*, it is also important to ask who is absent or missing from the history textbooks. Often women and minorities are relegated to the sidelines so it will be important to consider the contributions and impact of individuals or groups of people that are not included in the textbooks. These diagrams can also be used as note-taking forms for students. They can start with their textbooks and also interview parents and other people to see what other names might be notable.

Figure 3: Primary 4 and 5 Planning Diagrams

Primary 4 Planning Diagram



Primary 5 Planning Diagram



### **Planning, Locating, and Gathering Information of Notable Figures**

After selecting a Notable figure the next step is to help students make a plan for gathering information about their person. This is an important part of the process as it sets a purpose when reading and gathering information, and can provide a framework for the overall final written product. To help my students develop a research plan to guide their work, I present the analogy that their research plan is like a roadmap that helps them reach their destination without getting lost or sidetracked.

One way to guide students research efforts is to use Seixas's criteria to form guiding questions:

- What deep and important contribution or change has this person made?
- In what ways has this person affected a large number of people?
- In what ways has this person had an effect over a long period of time?
- How does this person's life help us understand the past or present?
- How has this person's life shed light on issues or problems that concerns us?

Another way to structure student work is to develop questions with the class using a chronological framework. These questions might include:

- Early years:
  - Where was my character born?
  - Who were my character's parents?
  - Where did my character live?
  - What other significant events or people influenced my character during this period of life?

- Middle years:
  - What relevant interests did my character develop?
  - Who are the people who influenced or mentored my character? (e.g. family, friends, etc)
  - What other significant events influenced my character during this period of life? (e.g. school, religion, etc)
- Later years:
  - What significant contributions did my character make?
  - Who are the people who influenced or mentored my character? (e.g. family, friends, etc)
  - What other significant events influenced my character during this period of life? (e.g. school, religion, work, etc)
  - How is my character remembered?

These frameworks not only help scaffold and focus the "hunting and gathering" process when collecting information, but can be used as an outline for writing up the final report, as information gathered for each question can be developed into separate paragraphs.

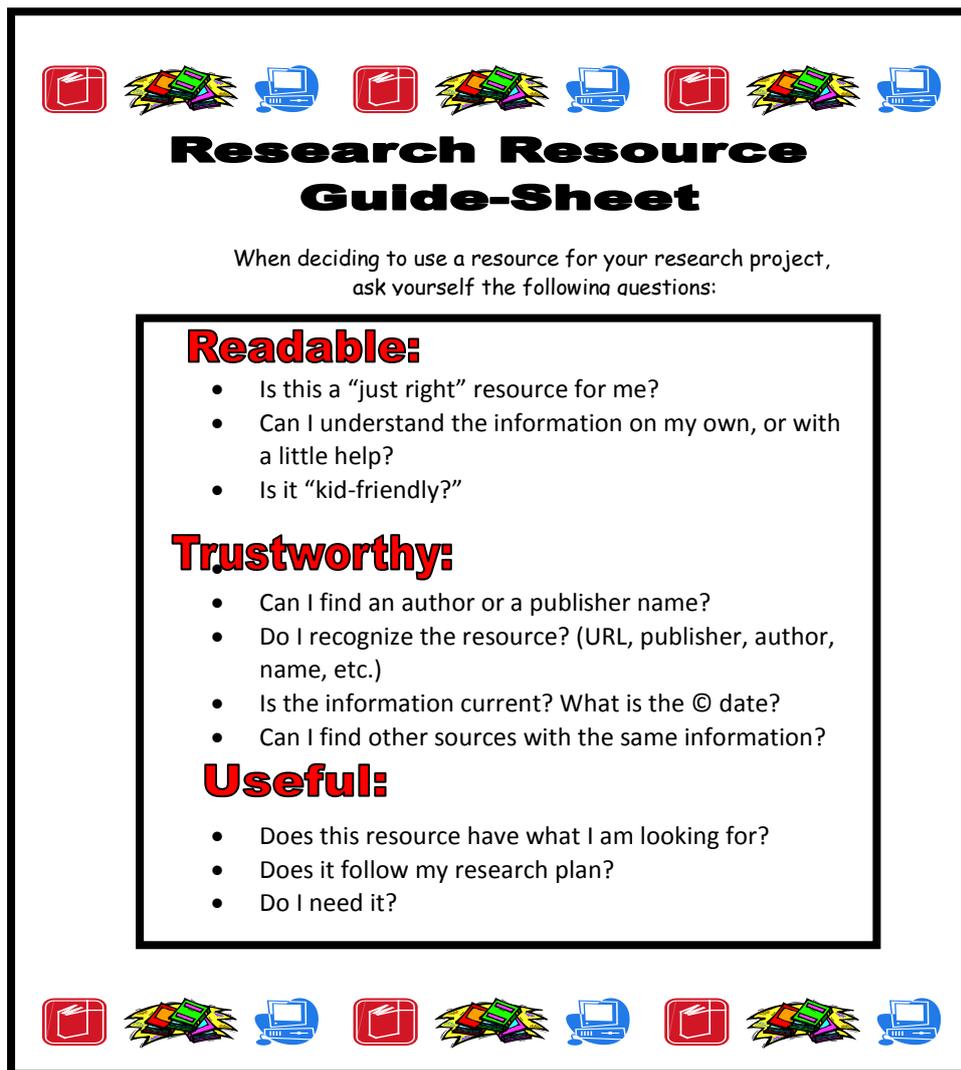
Finding resources to use when gathering information for each Notable can be a problem. The scarcity of resources and finding suitable information at each student's reading level is often a problem for primary teachers and students. Teachers can help find resources for the students from the school or public library, bookmark websites on the Internet at appropriate levels, and use available school resources such as encyclopedias. This can be time-intensive considering the number of students in your class (especially if you want a different Notable character for each student) and the range of reading levels

students are likely to have. If the information is above their reading level, especially when using encyclopedia type resources, parents or other adults can also be enlisted to help read and work through the text together.

I also use this project to teach my students

how to find readable, trustworthy, and useful information resources for their research. With the goal of helping students become independent and effective readers of information, I help my students develop and use a “Research Resource Guide” (see Figure 4: Research Resource Guide Sheet)

Figure 4: Research Resource Guide Sheet



This research process focuses on specific strategies students can use to gather trustworthy, readable, and useful information about their notable figures. (More about this

process and the ways students used this research guide can be found at Baildon & Baildon, 2012).

### Conclusion: Presenting the Notables

This is the part that the students look forward to – presenting their research and hard work to an audience! Teachers can adopt many different formats:

- Students dress up and take on the persona of their Notable. Their reports are written in the “first-person” as an autobiography. Parents and invited students interact with the Notables and ask the students questions to carry on a conversation with the Notable. Additional artifacts, backdrops (e.g., photos, quotes, and important highlights), a report, and/or a timeline of the Notable’s life are interesting additions to the presentation.
- Wax Museum: Notables are “frozen” until someone pushes a “button” that activates the Notable to tell a brief story about his or her life.
- Biography Box: Students present their information in a box, with additional photos, artifacts, books, etc. Students stand beside their box and answer any additional questions or present a prepared speech.
- Life-sized drawing or painting of their Notable: Students trace around their bodies on “butcher paper” and complete the drawings with appropriate costumes. The drawings are hung up, along with their report, with students standing by their Notable answering questions or presenting a prepared speech.

Other interesting additions to the Notables project that allow for the integration of art, music, or technology include:

- Arranging the Notables in a timeline around the room so that students learn how their character fits into history, and who lived or is living during their lifetime;
- Selecting music of the time period during which the Notable lived;

- Having students do pencil drawings as “self-portraits” of their Notable;
- Having students create slide shows or multimedia presentations;
- Creating brochures or trifold displays of the Notable.

The key, however, is for students to highlight and emphasize the characteristics that make their Notable figure significant. The criteria for significance should guide their research and their presentation. They should use evidence collected from different information sources to convincingly explain why their Notable is a significant figure, their contributions, and the impact they made as well as what they tell us about a particular period in history or important events and issues today. By understanding and applying the concept of significance, young students can begin to learn about the past in significant ways.

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