

High School History Doesn't Have to Be Boring

By tying past events to contemporary issues, teachers can move beyond rote memorization.

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It's not news that for over 100 years, history has been taught as little more than a callous exercise in regurgitation and rote memorization, with teachers rewarding how much information students can cram into their already stuffed heads. But as we go farther into the 21st century, with changes almost too numerous to fathom, I find it mindboggling that any teacher would still treat history class as boring preparation for a quiz show. This is no way to make learning about the past relevant and engaging. It really never was.

For deeper insight, I recently reached out to renowned history teacher Bruce Lesh, whose long list of accomplishments includes co-founding the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, serving as a vice-chair for the National Council for History Education, and being recognized as the 2008 pre-collegiate Teacher of the Year by the Organization of American Historians. At Franklin High School in Reisterstown, Maryland, Lesh champions historical inquiry and the way historians themselves study history. This approach de-emphasizes memorizing mountains of data.

"It's lecture, textbook, and coverage," Lesh tells me, characterizing the current state of history instruction. "I think there are islands of innovation and people who are seeing history as a discipline with a particular body of literacy skills and thinking skills embedded in it. But I think the vast majority say copy this down, fill in the blank—that sort of thing."

In Lesh's book, *Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7-12*, he offers an array of lessons and case studies, like how to introduce historical thinking through Nat Turner's Rebellion, chronological thinking and causality through the Railroad Strike of 1877, and historical empathy through the Truman-MacArthur Debate. Throughout, Lesh places a premium not on one's

ability to recall cold facts (which most will eventually forget, anyway), but on whether students can read critically, reference appropriate sources, and support an argument with evidence.

“I’m not preparing you to go work in the archives,” Lesh says, noting that in his 21 years in the classroom, he’s taught only one student who went on to earn a Ph.D. in history. “I’m preparing you to make a presentation to a client as to why your proposal to build their building is the best one. My job is to teach you how to make arguments. Arguments are based on the application of evidence, and evidence is gained through analysis of information. That’s what we do. We look at historical problems. We build arguments about the questions that we created. We teach you ways to use evidence to support your argument.”

More than most others’, Lesh’s work has urged me to reexamine how I teach history. In seven years on the job, most recently also as a Teacher of the Future for the National Association of Independent Schools, I’ve often revisited how I approach three of my biggest concerns:

- Teachers are foolish to expect students to remember anything for long that has little to no direct relevance in their daily lives.
- Teachers need to do a much better job of connecting history to today, and placing a greater emphasis on how young people could learn from past mistakes.
- Teachers should assess students on what they can do with what they know, rather than how much they know at any given time.

In American history, I start each unit by making obvious the connections to today. In my experience, nothing grabs student interest like pointing out not only human folly, but also how, to varying degrees, history repeats itself.

For instance, before teaching about European conquistadores like Hernán Cortés, who in the early 1500s conquered Mexico and the Aztec Empire for riches and glory, I play my favorite scene from the 1987 film *Wall Street*, where Gordon Gekko, an inside trader played by Michael Douglas, delivers his iconic “greed is good” monologue. I then assign students to investigate America’s recent financial troubles, and the role greed played in causing the recession. Next year, I plan to

show scenes from *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

From there on I have most students hooked. They want to learn more about Cortés, and why and how he went to such lengths. And because students want to learn, they care about retaining and building upon their understanding.

When teaching the early American republic, I have my students examine landmark Supreme Court rulings, including *McCulloch v. Maryland*, which affirmed the supremacy of the national government over the states. At the same time, I cultivate a deeper, more accessible understanding of federalism by covering the topic as it exists today. Students consider how California's more relaxed marijuana policy stands in contrast to stricter federal laws. I also introduce students to the No Child Left Behind Act, so that they can decide what role, if any, Washington should play in education.

Two years ago, of their own volition, several of my United States government students put their knowledge (and opinions) to good use while learning about blogging: They launched a website titled Making a Difference: Give a HOOT about Learning. The project consisted of only a few posts, but human beings learn best through sharing ideas and knowledge, whereby the learning also becomes deep and lasting.

I had sharing in mind again this year when my European history students learned about the millions of lives lost in the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II. In class, upon discussing similar atrocities in more recent history—and a long list of horrors that still haunt our world today—students wanted to make a difference. To do that, they created websites dedicated to raising awareness of crimes against humanity. By researching and voicing how to stop violence in Darfur, Uganda, Syria, and Venezuela, students took ownership of the learning—and they didn't learn for the mere sake of learning. They produced something with their newfound knowledge, all while harnessing essential 21st-century communications skills.

I treat the subject of history as a conduit to teach important modern competencies like writing, critical thinking, reasoning, and technology skills. This makes the content more relatable, useful, and engaging. I allow and encourage students to retake assessments. I don't penalize failure or missed deadlines severely. The end

goal is mastery, and I'm not nearly as concerned about when an individual masters a concept—just that it is in fact mastered. My students know that, and it encourages them to keep on trying to reach their fullest potential.

To make history even more accessible, every Wednesday I dedicate most of class to discussing current events. I find it worrisome when students can explain the finer points of lesser-known historical events, like the Teapot Dome scandal, but then have little clue about major world events happening in the present. To address that deficit, I assign weekly news articles for students to discuss in class. For instance, my students apply their knowledge of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the 1960s civil rights period, to inform their views on affirmative action—particularly as the policy relates to college admissions practices.

When it comes down to what the best history teachers do, and how they can really help students succeed in the world of tomorrow, Lesh puts it best: “I always tell [students], my job is to help them convince their parents that when they came in late after curfew, they shouldn't get in trouble. To do that, you have to make a logical, thoughtful argument that uses evidence and examples.”

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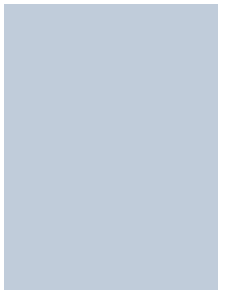
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