

Engagement in Teaching History

By Fred Drake and Lynn Nelson

What is a history “laboratory”? Your history classroom should be more akin to a “laboratory” in which questions are asked, evidence is examined, and discussions and hypotheses occur.

Sound advice for teaching history is “Just tell stories.”

Stories, when chosen carefully and told well, serve as a powerful attraction to the study of history.

We can relate to the past.

Classrooms need to have active learning taking place, the “doing of history.”

History is an action verb.

The history classroom is a “laboratory” where students and teachers ask questions together, discuss the past, and make meaning of the past, the present, and sometimes even the future.

Stories draw our interest to the past and frame our knowledge; the questions we ask about stories and primary sources help us construct meaningful durable knowledge.

Teachers provide the intellectual direction for the students.

No other discipline emphasizes “time” as does history.

History is the rare academic discipline that thrives on placing people’s lives and experiences in the context of their own time.

While knowing key dates, names, and places are important, they are not the culmination of historical understanding.

History when constructed meaningfully provides a foundation of enduring knowledge and skills.

Tap into your student’s curiosity and help them think *historically*.

Teacher and student co-investigate historical issues organized around historical themes, history’s habits of mind (informed ways of thinking), and with sound teaching strategies that actively engage your students.

Students need to establish interpretations based on evidence. (Similar to a science laboratory)

The Present and the Past

History is important especially the study of US history from a local, national, and international perspective.

Students must be engaged, take responsibility for involvement as a citizen of the US.

How do we organize historical knowledge so it is memorable?

Students need historical guidance to understand cultural differences.

Americans believe the highest purpose of government is to protect the rights of the people to whom it is responsible.

How have rights been marginalized, revived or even denied by governments? (Liberty vs. Security)

Connect political and social history in your teaching.

Emphasize to students primary sources, secondary sources, historiography, and presentism.

Organizing History Around Questions

Potential Organizing Questions for your History Class:

1. What are the meanings of freedom in the United States and in the world?
2. What are the political conditions and social conditions that make freedom possible in the United States and in the world?
3. What are the boundaries of freedom in the United States and in the world, and how have they been reduced as well as expanded?

Primary Sources and Interpretive Narrative Sources

In a history classroom all discussion must be based on historical facts-the more primary, the better.

Importance of Historical Thinking

"Citizenship is best cultivated when students learn the critical skills of historical investigation and draw their own conclusions supported by evidence drawn from primary sources." Larry Cuban

National Standards for History

- "Knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence."
- "History helps society share a common memory of where it has been, of what its core values are, or of what decisions of the past account for present circumstances."
- "History helps us engage in a sensible inquiry into political, social, or moral issues in society."
- "Knowledge of history and the inquiry it incites provides the foundation for "the informed, discriminating citizenship essential to effective participation in the democratic processes of government and the fulfillment for all our citizens of the nations' democratic ideals."
- History is a systematic way of thinking that organizes knowledge in a way that is different from other disciplines.
- Historical thinkers try to empathize, to truly understand people and events within the framework of their time.

- Historians try to avoid present-mindedness or “presentism.”
- We can make judgments about the past, but we must keep in mind that previous eras had different morals and mores. Although we cannot be totally objective, we should at least beware of our subjectivity.

The National Council for History Education identified what it calls six **“Vital themes and Narratives”** to help teachers organize the knowledge domain of a history curriculum.

1. Civilization, Cultural Diffusion, and Innovation
2. Human Interaction with the Environment
3. Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas and Institutions
4. Conflict and Cooperation
5. Comparative History of Major Developments
6. Patterns of Social and Political Interaction

The study of history should encompass more than the acquisition of discrete pieces of historical information. Although mastering the contours of a given narrative and knowing about significant individuals and events are important, it is essential that you and your students also know about the universal themes and ideas that cut across the human experience. These themes and ideas serve as screens that help students differentiate between what is important and what is insignificant in the historical record. Additionally, these themes provide students with patterned historical understandings that are memorable.

Teachers should:

- Introduce your students to history’s habits of mind and themes
- Have students translate them into their own words
- Post the habits of mind and themes in your classroom and refer to them as you encounter new historical topics
- Use the themes and habits of mind to organize your teaching and assessment of student learning
- Introduce your students to “historiography”
- Make use of deliberative discussions in your teaching.

Habits of the Mind

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| 1. Significance of the Past | |
| 2. What’s Important, and What’s Not | |
| 3. Historical Empathy | |
| 4. Shared Humanity | |
| 5. Change and Consequences | |
| 6. Change and continuity | |
| 7. History is Unfinished Business | |
| | 8. Campaign against Monocausality |
| | 9. History’s Tentative Nature |
| | 10. People Who Made a Difference |
| | 11. The Unintended and Unexpected |
| | 12. Time and Place are Inseparable |
| | 13. Evaluating Evidence |

History as an Essential School Subject

History is one of the most important disciplines in academia. History is important because it provides a powerful way to find out who and where we are in the human experience and in human affairs. History involves people, space, and time, and as human beings we are curious about where we have come from, where we are currently, and where we are going.

History teaching is both science and art. History involves us in the science of asking informed, structured questions about the past. History also involves us in the art of explaining how elements of the past are alive today while understanding the uniqueness of historical periods of time.

Understanding the Meanings of History

History is perhaps more modestly and more accurately defined as an interpretive history account of some portion of past reality.

Imagination and accuracy are the fundamental attributes of the historian.

Historians primarily question their sources when they are “doing” history. Teachers encourage their students to interrogate sources as they are learning history: The “doing of history”-or better yet, the “doing of teaching history” occurs as history teachers induce their students to reconsider and recast the historical understandings that they bring to the class

History teachers, by selecting primary and secondary sources and organizing their teaching around particular themes, promote real understanding of the past.

Deliberative Discussions

Deliberative discussion does not mean sharing uninformed opinions. Deliberative discussion is a focused and organized method for establishing the credibility of historical evidence and logically interpreting that evidence to develop historical understanding in students.