

Reviving History

Currently, the American education system is failing to uphold the value and importance of historical literacy. With "just 20% of fourth-graders, 17% of eighth-graders, and 12% of 12th-graders ... at grade-level proficiency in American history in the 2010 exams" (Gingrich, 54), the need for a restructured approach is undeniable. The crux of this failure is directly related to the ways historical education is taught. One approach to teaching history is to study it as a set of dead facts, memorizing dates and statistics of past wars, government agreements, and established doctrines. This static approach focuses on fact retention and regurgitation and, unfortunately, seems to be the model most used in the United States. The model supports the current testing standards mandated by the government in an attempt to force the knowledge of certain historical facts and stories. However, this numerically based, impersonal way of imparting required pieces of information is not only a failing program but an actual deterrent in both the learning and teaching of history.

The other, more ideal, approach to teaching history has to do with immersing students in an experiential process, engaging in critical thinking and pattern seeking aimed at uncovering the truth, as well as relating historical events to current events, making history culturally relevant to the students who are being taught. This second approach focuses on the actual learning of the students as opposed to the percentage of passing grades in a standardized examination. It is a much more effective way to arm our future citizens with the knowledge and thinking skills they will need to continue to extend the legacy of this country, building on what has already been accomplished.

History teacher and author David Cutler wrote an article for the [Atlantic Magazine](#) titled, "High School History Doesn't Have to Be Boring." In the article, Cutler discusses his solutions to

the issues plaguing his teaching and suggests "making obvious connections to today." He explains, "nothing grabs student interest like pointing out not only human folly, but also how, to varying degrees, history repeats itself." Cutler's innovative presentation of historical facts creates relevance for his students, giving them a reason to care about what it is they are discussing and showing them the ways they can use the knowledge of the past to change their future. He brings in modern films, current events, and discussion topics that reflect the themes of the lessons he is teaching. He uses these tools to teach his students how to identify the patterns in what has occurred and then overlays that same pattern onto issues happening today. Cutler's way of modernizing the material teaches his students how to look beyond basic dates and statistics, exposing them to a level of critical thinking that offers them a sense of potency and intelligence. In making history current, Cutler inductively leads his students to the recognition that the more they know about the past, the more they can influence the future.

Cutler presents an example of how he is able to modernize history, thereby making it relatable and also relevant for his students. He explains that "before teaching about European conquistadores like Hernan Cortes... I play my favorite scene from the 1987 film Wall Street where Gordon Gekko... delivers his iconic 'greed is good' monologue." Cutler then links the character's monologue with current financial issues in the United States, asking them to explore the ways greed instigates economic issues. At this point, the students can start to see how the concept of greed relates directly to their own lives. With this personal interest, the students are engaged in the narrative of Cortez and notice history repeating itself through present circumstances. This approach bridges the gap between historical ideas, which seem dead and irrelevant, to present day issues, which determine the successes and opportunities of each student. Such personal engagement inspires the students to retain and integrate the information

they are learning, not only for the tests they need to pass, but for their overall well-being and success.

Critical thinking is a necessary skill for all successful citizens. Historians are well versed in the art of critical thinking, analyzing multiple sets of evidence in order to paste together the most accurate understanding of past events. Using a history class to train students how to think like a historian offers those students a skill which will permanently change their lives. Brian Lesh is a renowned history teacher who wrote the book, Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7-12. Lesh's book outlines the benefits of teaching history as a thinking strategy. He points out that "to fully promote a study of the past, students must be taught and provided the occasions to engage in the development, defense, and revision of evidence-based historical interpretations" (21). Currently, history classes teach that there is a right and wrong answer. This authoritarian model requires the students' full agreement to the lessons presented. Lesh argues that this model is deeply flawed and while he agrees "generally, the facts are not debatable" he points out that the "questions of why and how, and the effect of choices are perpetually open to reinterpretation as new documents and fresh questions are applied to the past" (Lesh, 20). In broadening the way historical events are studied, Lesh brings life to the stories told, giving the students the opportunity to unpack the subtleties of the events and imagine intent and interpretation. He then requires the students to research the events in order to present evidence that supports their claims. Such an exercise causes the participants to gain a deep understanding of what they are studying. Without any memorization at all, the students know what happened, potential reasons why, and how to think historically in order to validate their arguments both in the classroom, and in their future.

Lesh offers a sample lesson plan in order to plot out exactly how to teach historical thinking in the classroom. He uses the story of Nat Turner as a basis for learning this new thinking process. Lesh presents his students with a series of interpretations of the event, including primary and secondary sources such as diary entries, newspaper articles, artistic renderings, and modern textbooks. Lesh then asks the students to think more analytically about each source by researching its contextual background, what was going on at the time the source was published. He then teaches the students to uncover what he calls the "subtext" of the source. He defines subtext as "what is between the lines" and instructs the students to ask questions about "the author, the audience, and the reason" (39). This step-by-step process of critical thinking and analysis teaches the students to question and research all information presented as opposed to dogmatically ingesting information as truth. The lesson is not only about what to analyze and learn, but how. With a focus on this process of thinking, Lesh empowers the students to think beyond what is presented and to generate narratives and conclusions which seem most rational and plausible because of evidence and scrutiny as opposed to convenience and faith.

Once the sources have been thoroughly analyzed, Lesh assigns the students an imaginative exercise. This exercise requires that they pretend they are historians hired by "the state of Virginia Historical Trust to develop a historical marker that will be placed alongside the road-side adjacent to the area impacted by Nat Turner and his followers" (40). They must compose their best, most historically accurate interpretation of the event to be inscribed on the marker. In doing so, the students are required to present an argument which includes all the sources analyzed and the reasons why they arrived at the interpretation they are presenting. A pioneering educator named Maria Montessori wrote in her book The Absorbent Mind, "We often

forget that imagination is a force for the discovery of truth" (177). Lesh's approach to teaching history requires that the students activate their imaginations in order to uncover the truth and then express this truth to their peers. Such an exercise not only holds student interest in a creative, imaginative way, but it teaches them how to pull apart previously presented explanations in order to reveal flaws and biases and ultimately construct their own evidence-based argument.

Research in cognitive psychology supports the theories Lesh and Cutler present. In Lesh's book, he explains the nature of learning for understanding and how it relates to deep, focused thinking. Lesh discusses the importance of teaching students how to build a conceptual framework that gives them access to a type of thinking that involves retrieving known facts, comparing those facts to new facts, and synthesising the conclusions made about the similarities and differences in order to support their conclusions. This skill requires that the students actually use the facts presented to them instead of simply memorizing them. It also requires that they look for ways to relate these new facts to things they already know and understand: "a student can't know something unless it is related to something he or she already knows" (194). Taking students through this process ensures that they will not only remember the information presented, but they will also understand it. The cognitive functioning of the brain requires the formation of complex neurological pathways, generated out of necessity. Such neural networks are created by linking a known idea with an unknown idea. Once the structure is created, it will "make retention of information more long lasting, and increase the chances that the skills embedded in the model will transfer to new situations" (Willingham et al, qtd. by Lesh, 194). Teaching students the process of linking foreign ideas to familiar ideas gives them an invaluable tool that they will use to succeed in all areas of their lives. Learning how to formulate opinions and understand the

intricate nature of any given situation provides individuals with intellectual autonomy, allowing for informed decision making and responsible citizenship.

If historical education shifts its focus from teaching students to repeat facts mindlessly to teaching students how to think deeply, it will provide a type of education that can be used to bring students a personal understanding of the system they are a part of. They will be able to recognize the patterns exposed through historical cycles as well as the ways in which they can change those patterns. Such empowered thinking may intimidate those currently in power. Once knowledge is imparted the people may demand changes that could threaten the current, traditional ways of governing. However, focusing on resuscitating the dead past by using the lens of current, relevant circumstances, teaching critical thinking and analysis as opposed to rote memorization and factual dissemination, and redefining the reasons for teaching history will nurture a generation of responsible thinkers armed and ready to change the direction of their nation with pride and proactivity. Such engagement will cause the students to embody their learning, using the past to not only promote but actually create a more ideal future.

Works Cited

Cutler, David. "High School History Doesn't Have to Be Boring." The Atlantic, 1 May 2014.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/05/how-i-teach-history/361459/>.

Gingrich, Callista Louise. "America's Students Failing to Learn History." Mental Floss V, edited by David Morse, XanEdu, 2019.

Lesh, Brian. Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades

7-12. Stenhouse Publishers, 2011.

Montessori, Maria. The Absorbent Mind. Dell Publishing Company, 1967.