Non-traditional Sources and Current Events in the History Classroom

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Abstract

This research paper will argue that that the signature pedagogy for history is the inclusion of non-traditional historical sources and discussion of current events. Daniel Cohen’s (2005) research showed that textbooks are relied on too heavily in the classroom and they do not provide for an engaging learning experience. Textbooks are an antiquated source for teaching. Teachers need to move past sole reliance on textbooks and PowerPoints, and make the move towards non-traditional historical sources, such as music. Music is a phenomenal way to engage students in critical thinking and analytical strategies. Music as always responded to and influenced society. Students will be interested in the topic, and eager to learn. In addition to non-traditional historical sources, both John Lewis Gladdis (1990) and Allan Yarema (2002) suggest in their research that teaching contemporary history is the key to effective learning. Teachers separate the past and the present and disconnect students from the world they are living in. We live in a country that prides itself on the freedom of democracy; our nation’s youth need to be informed and civically competent members of society.

Educators and historians have long debated over the most effective ways to teach history. These professionals have come up with a vast amount of theories and models for teaching the history discipline. Theories have ranged from text-book based classrooms, to primary source based to classrooms, to debate-based classrooms. The question is: Is there one correct way to teach history? To put it simply, no, there is not. But is there a *best* way to teach history? Yes, there is, and it involves the inclusion of non-traditional historical sources and discussion of current events. These three items are what make up the most effective signature pedagogy for history.

Traditionally, history courses at all levels have been taught with a textbook as the dependent source material, especially survey courses. Daniel Cohen (2005) found in his research that more than one-third of colleges depend solely on textbooks for history classes. That means that more than one-third of college history classes do not study any kinds of primary sources or alternative forms of historical research. A textbook-based class leads to the well-known, incredibly rigid and boring history course. Student’s most common complaint with the study of history is that it is boring. Relying solely on the use of a textbook is the main culprit of this monotony. Why do students find textbooks so boring? One explanation is their pure objectiveness. Every historian always tries to have some sort of objectivity to their work, but there is always an argument as bias in every good historical source. Subjectivity is what makes history interesting. Reading conflicting points of view and arguments are a major part of studying history. The problem with textbooks is that they lack subjectivity. Textbooks serve to provide facts, such as dates, people, places, and the general overview of what happened during major historical events. The put it simply, objectivity is boring. Studying textbooks turns into students remembering people, places, and dates for a test. There is a lack of analysis and critical thinking. As Cohen (2005) suggests, the sole reliance on a textbook leads to a “teaching to test” model. Students are concerned with nothing else but doing well on the test. They learn to remember. They do not learn to understand. Students are preoccupied with remembering the facts for the test. Once the test is over, the “knowledge” is gone.

The question that follows this realization is: What should teachers do instead of relying solely on textbook? Cohen (2005) suggests the use of electronic resources. This approach is good, but problematic from an economic standpoint. The most effective course of action is to use non-traditional historical sources. One of the greatest ways to study history is through music. Music has both reacted to and influenced historical events through time. There are many major historical events that can be studied through just listening to the music of the time. Musicians generate songs based on what is going on around them. One great example of studying history through music is the Vietnam War. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Vietnam War protests were prevalent throughout the United States. Amidst a time of intense change and counterculturalism, people protested against this deadly war on all fronts. One of the major mediums of protest that occurred was music. Anti-war songs became a staple of the 1960s. As musicians wrote songs about their frustration with the war, they channeled the thoughts and opinions of millions of American citizens. Musicians such as Creedence Clearwater Revival and Bob Dylan laid the foundation for anti-war mantras. Through listening to these songs and reading the lyrics, we can discover an entire new window into the Vietnam War. We are able to gain a perspective of the Vietnam War domestically that we very well may not have been able to through the use of a textbook. There is also another obvious advantage of studying music; it’s fun. Young people relish in alternative forms of school work. Whether it be a movie in class or a speech from someone that participated in ahistorical event, students love to step outside the rigid classroom environment of textbooks and PowerPoints. This environment is rigid, boring, and not conducive to optimal engagement. When studying music, students will be more excited and engaged, and student engagement is the key to learning. The use of alternative forms of history, such as music, does not mean that textbooks should be completely expelled from the classroom. Textbooks serve a purpose. They exist to provide students will valuable historical context and facts that are essential to understanding major historical events. But for students to experience a deeper understanding, they must move past the textbook and participate in more engaging forms of learning.

Isn’t it sad that we don’t teach current events in history classes? Teachers rarely ever even get to the 1990s, let alone the issues that are before us right now. As John Lewis Gladdis (1990) states, “It's a sad commentary that the one thing most people remember from their high school history courses -- and too often from college courses as well -- is that they never got around to what the students most wanted to know about, which was the history of their own time.” In his research, Gladdis (1990) argues that teaching contemporary history is the key to effective learning. In history classrooms, teachers and textbooks separate the past from the present. Gladdis (1990) sees this separation as “the single greatest impediment to the effective teaching of history.” Teachers too often hold themselves to a binding code of teaching what is in the past and in the textbook. Large emphases are always put on events like the American Revolution and World War II. Yes, these events are incredibly important to study, but why are they the only things we study? Why do we not learn about what is happening now? There is no class that teaches current events. Gladdis (1990) argues that “The failure to teach the history of our own times not only leaves our students ill-equipped to deal with the present and the future; it also ensures that they will have little interest in, and therefore little knowledge of, the history of other times either.” As Allan Yarema (2002) suggests, “By looking at what was currently happening and providing current statistics, students could be challenged to discuss events and processes in the past that cause these differences.” History is essentially an enormous inter-connected web of experiences and events. Everything is history comes from something else. The United States government is modeled off of the ancient Roman Republic. The pressing issue of race relations is a tremendously important topic that needs to be discussed in schools. Through the studying of these current race relations, students will have go back in time to look for the past experiences and roots of these controversies. All of the important issues in our country stem from past experiences and events in history.

Students are immersed in the here and now. Once you completely throw away the present and go into the past, students don’t care. They are uninterested in events that have no impact on their lives. History can very easily become dull with the exclusion of the present. In addition to these points, studying current events is incredibly important for another reason. The majority of high school students are not civically competent. Most students don’t know who the Speaker of the House is, or what he/she even does. Most students can’t name more than one person that’s running for president. Most students don’t even know the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. Through personal experience, it is evident that students today are civically incompetent. In a country that prides itself on democracy and freedom, where everyone of age is eligible to vote, this is not acceptable. As Yarema suggests, the importance of current events in the classroom is not a new concept. He (2002) states that “As early as 1964, *The Teaching of American History in High Schools* argued that American history courses must include discussion of current events, even if that meant excluding some topics.” As noted, you can’t include everything. If you try to include everything, what will happen is what has always happened. Teachers will spend exorbitant amounts of time on the American Revolution, the Civil War and World War I, and they will only get as far as the immediate aftermath of World War II. What about the last 70 years? Teachers need to spend less time on the Industrial Revolution, and more time on present U.S. relations in the Middle East. Our nation’s youth need to be informed enough to make conscious decisions that will affect our country’s future. These students are the future.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no right way to teach history. However, there is a best way. This “best” way includes the inclusion of non-traditional historical sources and discussion of current events. This means that teachers need to shift away from the traditional model of studying history that involves heavy reliance on the textbook. Massive history textbooks and PowerPoint presentations are antiquated. We need to move forward as a society. Students are learning how to memorize dates and take tests. They need to be learning how to think critically, analyze historical sources, and, most of all, they need be civically informed.

1800 Words

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