

Focusing on the '50s: A 9TH Grade American History Unit

by
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INTRODUCTION

W

ith each new year, fresh challenges confront those of us in the teaching profession. The awesome power of the Internet opens up new sources of knowledge that will change forever how we conduct research. I believe computers and the technology associated with them are tremendous tools from which we can obtain information. We can't however, rely solely on the Internet. In my teaching I try to blend various instructional and research methods to insure my students are genuinely building knowledge and not just having unprocessed information served up to them on a silver platter from the Internet. What follows is a description of an instructional unit I have developed that illustrates these ideas.

FOCUSING ON THE '50S

I developed a 9th grade American history unit focusing on a study of the 1950s. This unit plan involved the learner in a variety of learning experiences. While most student activities evolved over the course of my twelve-year teaching career, other components described here reflect new ideas to be added for the 1999-2000 school year.

I started by identifying the following unit objectives:

- Students will analyze American Society of the 1950's.
- Students will compare and contrast the culture of the 1950's with that of the present.

These general objectives shaped the direction around which the following six activities would be structured. By design, these activities were built upon learning experiences that involved students in small group interaction, investigations using primary source materials, interviews in the community, analysis of artifacts and simulation.

Brainstorm Starter: The first activity involved putting students in groups of threes or fours. Students remained in these groups throughout the course of the unit. They started by brainstorming for 10 minutes answers to the question, "What do you know about the 1950's?" Topics included teen life, schools, cars, etc. After 10 minutes, we held a class discussion with each group participating. I wrote responses on the overhead or chalkboard as each group reported.

Looking Back into the Yearbook: The second activity utilized yearbooks as primary source materials. Students were asked to find yearbooks from the 1950s by talking to family members the week prior to the start of the unit. It was here that they saw how accurate their brainstorming was! They examined activities students participated in, how students of the '50s dressed and even how they autographed the yearbooks. Each group came up with at least 3 similarities and 3 differences between the '50s and current school culture. A class discussion was held after all groups had completed the activity. This experience was quite motivating for students and it often took an entire period or more to finish it.

Rock and Roll: The third activity, involving rock and roll music, also relied on primary source materials. I asked students to bring in CD's of music from the 1950's. We started by listening to the music casually while doing chapter worksheets. Then each group selected a song, downloaded the lyrics from the Internet and reported to the group what they thought the musician was writing about. I then asked them to tell how this song reflected the culture and values of the 1950's.

That Fifties Look: Another motivating activity involved converting my room to a 1950's house. I directed students to access a great Website <http://www.magnetplace.com/RETRO> which took the viewer on a cyber-tour of a 1950's home down to the smallest detail. The students and I then saw if we could come up with a few similar items with which to decorate my room. In the past that has involved transporting in tables, chairs, and even carpeting. Sometimes this activity has taken on a life of it's own as students earned extra credit by dressing up in 1950s attire. The catch was that they had to wear the clothes ALL DAY long in order to earn their credit. We usually selected a date and had everyone dress up on the same day. This of course included the teacher.

A 1950s Sock-Hop: Some years I have culminated the unit with a 1950's sock-hop. We tried to set the music, dress, and decorations all in the 1950's. The planning for this was extremely important and it often took a solid month for us to get ready. Some years the students have really gotten into it and the sock-hop has become a school wide dance. In the future I am going to contact a local hotrod club and invite them to display their cars in the student parking during the pre-dance tailgate cookout.

An Interview: I am a history teacher today in part because of the oral tradition in my own family and it is my opinion that oral history is the most valuable source of history we have. A new activity I will add to this unit next year will be a personal interview with someone from the community who graduated from high school in the 1950's. Each group will prepare a ten to 20-item questionnaire for an interviewee. When conducting interviews, students will be reminded to take on a conversational style and not strictly confine their interview to the prepared questions. From the pool of interviewees, we will invite some people to visit the classroom as guest speakers.

SUMMARY

Most of my students find the 1950's unit to be very motivating. Because each group of students is unique, every spring I teach this unit differently. By that time in the school year I have a good idea of what level of participation to expect from my students. Throughout this unit I also try to address as many instructional tools and teaching methodologies as possible. By using the Internet, primary source materials, oral and narrative histories, hands-on learning strategies, interpretive skills, community outreach, and brainstorming I hope to address the particular learning styles of all students. It also makes teaching and learning fun as well!

Biography

Matt Miller teaches High School American and World History at Bondurant-Farrar Jr./Sr.High school in Bondurant, Iowa, a suburb of Des Moines. He graduated in 1985 from the University of Northern Iowa with a BA in History/Education.