

HISTORY DAY: A TEACHER'S FIRST CHOICE

by

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Introduction

A growing "menu" of worthwhile local, state, and/or national contests requires social studies teachers to become increasingly selective, otherwise they and their students will simply gorge themselves on competition. Why should teachers of history, when faced with such an inviting feast of contests, select History Day as part of their yearly competition diet?

History Day deserves selection because it is more than a contest, it is also a way of learning history. It encourages students to "do history" by getting them to gather, organize, and think about information. It also requires students to use a variety of creative talents in language, literature, and the arts in order to communicate their research, to engage in dialogues with other students and adults and to compare their own efforts with that of their peers.

A feature of History Day that enhances the development of critical thinking is the use of an annual theme. This requires students to become selective in their choice of topic and research. This year's theme, "Rights in History," was chosen to help celebrate the bicentennial of the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Students, individually or in groups, make history come alive as their research on the theme leads to imaginative projects, original performances, media presentations, and papers at district contests. First and second place winners in the junior (sixth through eighth grades) and senior (ninth through twelfth grades) divisions advance to a state contest held on the Iowa State Campus during the annual VEISHEA festivities. State winners qualify for the national contest held at the University of Maryland in June and also (an opportunity unique to Iowa) to participate in a tour of historic sites such as Williamsburg and Monticello.

Well publicized reports of the deficiencies of American students when compared to their counterparts around the world have spawned interest in academic contests of various kinds. Many of these new contests have resulted from the nation's fascination with test scores. Students, according to numerous national surveys, lack a knowledge of history, government, and geography. Consequently, contests have sprung up in order to encourage students to learn facts about these subjects. Unfortunately, this approach has tended to reinforce rote learning as students take a "spelling bee" approach to factual information on government, history, or geography. This is the type of learning that schools should avoid not embrace. Unlike these other contests, History Day fosters the best in learning for it encourages the use of critical thinking skills, communication skills, creativity and cooperation while developing a mastery of content. No other contest can make this claim.

Getting Started

Students begin by selecting a related topic, then locate sources of information on that topic. Gathering information engages students in the hunt for relevant information on their selected topic and usually begins in school and local libraries, but can lead to such depositories as historical archives and museums. Very often the researchers write to or interview individuals who may very well have participated in the event under investigation.

Once the research has been completed, students must decide how best to present their story. Some will want to write papers because they have strong writing skills. But others, because they have artistic and mechanical skills, may choose to create a project or display. Students who have visual skills and can operate video and audio equipment in a creative way may decide to develop a media presentation. Students with dramatic ability may want to write and perform an original skit. The purpose of such varied activities is not to regurgitate information that has been gathered in student research, but to use it to create an imaginative product.

The process of using information to write a paper, develop a media or live presentation, or construct a display requires selectivity. Hence students engage in critical thinking. They must decide which pieces of information communicate best, just as historians select

from large amounts of data that which best tells the story of an event. They must also decide how best to organize their data. It is not enough to present a random list of events. This process necessitates that students think about history and conduct historical research much as a historian would.

Unlike many scientific disciplines, history does not lend itself to objective measurement. Neither can events be run over and over again with differing variables to determine which factors played the greatest influence. Although evaluating student presentations often seems subjective, criteria are used in judging. Besides rules relating to size, time, and method of presentation, entries are judged on their historical quality, quality of presentation, and adherence to the theme. Sixty percent of the evaluation is determined by historical quality, i.e., accuracy, analysis and interpretation, historical context, and use of sources. Twenty percent of judging relates to the quality of presentation and includes such factors as clarity, creativity, and originality. Adherence to the annual theme completes the judging criteria. Judges are encouraged to engage in an intellectual dialogue with participants, asking such questions as, "Why they chose their topic?, How they went about developing it?, and What they learned from it?" When this works, it provides students with an intellectual feast.

History Day in a Classroom Context

How then should the teacher use History Day in the context of teaching history to students?

First, History Day works best when it is seen as part of the curriculum, when teachers see History Day as a vehicle for helping them teach "better history, better." There is little doubt, that doing a History Day presentation can get students excited about history. History Day should merely be an extension of good teaching. Even if History Day did not exist, its approach to teaching history ought to be utilized in every history classroom. Doing History Day engages students in the process of locating, gathering, evaluating, synthesizing, and organizing information. These are vital critical thinking skills which are needed, not only to be successful in life, but to be a responsible citizen. Because History Day is organized around a given theme and because it provides opportunity for group presentations,

students often engage in cooperative learning. This occurs when students work on group presentations, but also as they gather and share information, for while they compete against other students, they often make different presentations.

Second, teachers must possess a thorough understanding of the theme. Not doing this is unfair to students. To help teachers do this, the National History Day office develops a one-page description of the theme. These can be obtained from your AEA History Day coordinator or from the state History Day office. It is best to begin History Day by brainstorming possible topics followed by a process of selecting viable topics, exploring the implications of each topic, and vitally important, identifying possible primary and secondary sources of information. The National History Day office also produces a pamphlet suggesting topics and sources. This year the Commission of the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution has developed a National History Day Supplement, "Rights in History," which is now available free from the AEA or the State History Day office. In addition, a workshop will be held in Ames during the Iowa Council for the Social Studies conference on October 18, 1990. Several sessions will be presented on "Rights in History." The workshops will include discussion on content, resources, and methods. Materials will also be distributed. An excellent source of materials on the history of the Bill of Rights can be obtained from the Constitutional Rights Foundation, 601 South Kingsley Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90005 or from The Center for Law-Related Education, Drake University Law School, 1155 28th Street, Des Moines, IA 50311.

Third, making History Day a part of the curriculum requires that students engage in more than independent study. Information gathered by students must also be shared with the class and must be used to help achieve class goals. One approach to this is to employ a "search, share, and synthesis," format. This teaching strategy begins by having students gather information on related topics, i.e. various rights in the Bill of Rights. After the search has been completed, students share information as part of a group or with the class in more formal presentations. Since all students are responsible for the entire topic, i.e., the history of Bill of Rights, they should record the information in a usable form, such as a chart. Once the information has been shared, it becomes the basis for drawing

conclusions and raising synthesis questions requiring students to use all the information previously shared. An example of a synthesis question might be, "Which of the rights has been the most difficult to maintain?" or "Which of these rights is the most important today?" or "If you had to eliminate one of these rights, which one would you eliminate?" Synthesis questions are designed to get students to think about the material, not regurgitate it.

Conclusion

While the History Day competition results in winners and losers and although there are only a few winners at each level of competition, there are, in fact, no losers if History Day is used as a method for making history come alive. To do this the competition must not be viewed as an end in itself, but as a means for getting students in touch with the excitement of the "hunt" or the "chase" of doing history.

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