

AFRAID OF THE PAST?

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In the last ten years, since Lies My Teacher Told Me debuted, I must have spoken in front of 20,000 teachers of social studies and history. What have I learned?

All kinds of tips and tricks on how to teach history more effectively. On the darker side, however, I've learned that teachers of history/social studies can be divided into two groups: those who teach creatively and those who don't. Unfortunately, I think the two groups divide about $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$. Indeed, research I summarized in Lies My Teacher Told Me found that students in history courses spend more class time with their textbooks than students in any other discipline.

This finding left me stunned, at first. I mean — how can students in, say, plane geometry interview their folks on dodecahedrons? How can they use community resources? Old folks? The census? The web? Books in the library? Yet history and social studies students can use all of these sources of information and more.

But they don't. Instead, teachers get students reading every mind-numbing page of their 1104-page textbook, answering the question posed at the back of each photo caption, and doing the "Activities" "Reviewing Themes," "Identifying Central Issues," "Analyzing Information," and "Checking for Understanding" found in The American Journey, to take one recent example, published in 2000.

Several reasons motivate teachers to teach straight from the textbook. First, the textbooks are huge. Journey actually sets new (and unfortunately larger) records for the tallest, widest, and heaviest American History textbook ... and it's just for middle schoolers! Just as one reason why the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki was because we had it, one reason why history students spend so much time with their

textbooks is because they have them. Having a bigger book only spurs conscientious teachers to get students to spend even more time with it.

Second, this is how most history and social studies teachers, in their youth, were taught. They have not met role models who got them to go beyond or even challenge their textbooks. They just do what was done unto them.

Third, most states now mandate various tests students must pass to graduate from grade to grade. States are required to by No Child Left Behind and were already moving in that direction. Teachers must teach to these tests, not only so their pupils can pass them, but also because their students' scores are used to evaluate their own performance and that of their school. Unfortunately, these tests are usually in multiple choice format to facilitate machine grading. Therefore they test "twig history." (Not only aren't we helping students discern "the forest" — we aren't even teaching "trees," but only testable "twigs," my favorite being "When did the War of 1812 begin?") Concentrating on textbook minutiae helps teach twigs, or so teachers believe.

Two other factors also keep teachers on the straight and narrow teach-the-textbook path: fear of the top and fear of the bottom. Many teachers and students in teacher ed programs worry that if they get students thinking, they'll be seen as rocking the boat and will get in trouble — from their principal, superintendent, or parents. The basic storyline in American history textbooks is one of unending progress — we were discovered by great men, our nation had great founders, and we've been improving steadily ever since. Getting students to challenge their textbooks seems tantamount to inviting them to question this storyline — seems, in a word, unpatriotic.

Teachers can also worry that they do not know enough history to deviate from the book — which was written by a panel of expert historians, after all. They fear they might unleash a Pandora's box. As soon as they research a topic — the women's movement, the Battle of the Bulge, whatever — students may know more than their teacher about it, which might cause the teacher to lose face, maybe even control. Or students may go off on tangents, teachers also worry, relying on unvetted information from websites with religious, racial, or just plain ridiculous axes to grind.

Each of these five causes for caution is understandable, yet not one is a valid reason for clinging so tightly to the textbook. Huge textbooks may have been appropriate for classes in Manning, Iowa, pop. 1,490, in 1970, when neither the community library nor the high school library had

many resources for teaching American history. Today, however, wherever students have access to telephone lines, they can browse hundreds of thousands of historic documents on the web. I suggest school districts adopt short paperback textbooks, which students can buy for less than the cost of renting the behemoths of yore. But even if your district is locked into its 1000-page textbook, that doesn't mean you have to assign every page. Consider the textbook as one of many teaching aids — and not necessarily the most important — as you introduce each new topic.

It is hard to pioneer new ways to teach, different from how we were taught. However, courses in social studies and history that relied on the textbooks were probably not among our favorites in our own K-12 years, if we think back. Nor are they popular today. Students will learn more when they like and are interested by their courses.

“Standardized” tests do constitute a problem, to be sure. The only real solution is to construct tests worth teaching to. Ironically, considering the source, such a test exists: the Advanced Placement exam in U.S. History. In its DBQ (Document-Based Questions), it actually challenges students to write coherent essays that use (or ignore, as appropriate) historic documents to answer questions. The thinking, writing, and background information required by the DBQ are skills also required by life after formal education. Never in the world of employment, checkbook balancing, or plain citizenship do we have to choose among alternatives A, B, C, D, or E. Multiple choice tests only prepare us to take multiple choice tests.

Even if your students face required multiple choice exams that test twig history, however, it remains true that the way to get them to retain twigs is not by having them memorize twigs. Today's teeny-bopper has learned to cope with twig questions by devoting a certain mass of synapses to “useless facts in American history.” As soon as the student has finished the exam on that unit, s/he clears that area of the brain to make room for more twigs. Finally in June the synapses get cleared once more, and the student has retained nothing — yet earned an A-! When we teach history as a series of important issues, on the other hand, each presented with passion and with relevance to the presence, students invest intellectual and emotional energy in their work and remember things for years.

The fear factor turns out to be most widespread of all — but perhaps easiest to deal with. Experienced teachers who have mastered or ignored their worries about repercussions from parents or administrators find that there are ways of minimizing or eliminating those repercussions. They can

start by developing a list of 30 to 80 topics, each of which is important to understanding our nation's history, interests them, and has relevance to the present. They can then link this finite list to the various skills that Iowa (and other states) claims to want to develop via its social studies/history curriculum.

Students then use different methods to learn about each item. They may use a formal debate to examine the two (or more) sides of one issue. They may put a historic figure on trial. They may explore a third topic on their own, via a written term paper. Local history may provide the key to exploring another topic — the women's movement of the 1970s, for instance. And yes, the textbook, too, plays a role.

Although scary in prospect, teachers who have put such methods into practice report that their social studies and history classes are now exhilarating. Wonderful stories result — such as the sixth graders who wrote the publisher, complaining that their textbook completely left out the fact that most of our early presidents owned slaves — triggering a hilarious non-reply. Or the girls who entered their local history project into the National History Day competition and then changed how their town remembered the past on its landscape.

The American past is hardly so dreadful that we must lie about it and pretty it up — we can face our blunders as well as our triumphs. Students are our allies, and it can be a source of pride rather than worry when they learn something we don't know. The proportion of teachers in social studies and history who teach creatively — who help their students challenge rather than simply “learn” their textbooks — is steadily growing. I hope you come aboard, if you're not already in this crew. There is little to fear, except fear itself — to paraphrase ... now, who was that?