

HOOKED ON HISTORY

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"Why are you taking this course?" the history teacher asked on the first day of class.

"It's part of my general education requirement—but is there any way I can get out of it?" said one.

"I hate history; it is just a bunch of dates and events of the past that has nothing to do with my life today," said another.

"History is boring and full of memorization that signifies nothing," responded another student.

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Most people like a good story, especially if it is about their own family. Yet when it comes to the collective story of humanity, they often consider it boring, irrelevant, and only for professors with a warped sense of humor. Instead of enjoying history and seeing it as a necessary ingredient for life, many college students view it as an unnecessary imposition.

It could be that history teachers themselves are to blame for not adequately presenting history as our link to the past. Or it could be that since there is no obvious connection between history and bank accounts, students think it is irrelevant. Therefore, history teachers at all levels must find ways to make sure that students see the story of humankind as valuable in understanding their present world. This article will focus on the teaching of history at the college level, but many of the ideas are compatible with the secondary and grade school levels as well.

The Bradley Commission has stated that "history is vital for all citizens in a democracy, because it provides the only avenue we have to reach an understanding of ourselves and our society in relation to the human condition over time and how some things change while others continue."¹ Other important reasons for studying history include the following:

- History can help students to understand and deal with change, while at the same time identifying the deep continuities that link the past and the present. A well-taught history class can "satisfy young people's longing for a sense of identity and of their place in the human story."²

- History reveals the effect of technology, economy, and culture on the human family.

- History provides "a framework and illumination for the other humanities. Literature, philosophy, religion, and the arts are best studied as they develop over time and in the context of societal evolution."³

- Studied in the correct context, history can provide a nation with active, intelligent citizens who from their study of political institutions will understand and respect the issues of liberty, equality, and justice—human rights—with-in a multicultural world society.

The task of the history teacher is both

simple and complex. It is not just to teach facts and dates, but to develop critical thinking skills, to focus on development, judgment, perspective, and broad questions based on material, events, and issues that are pertinent to the students' lives. In other words, as students understand that individuals in the past had to solve problems, they will become aware that we have similar problems, but may need different tools to work on them. Apart from being able to tell the story of the past, students should learn to analyze history by looking at some of the original sources and evaluating them.

Teachers can adopt many methods and plans to link the past to students' lives. This will make their classes relevant and enjoyable. One of the time-tested ways is through the use of real people—biographics. Well-written, carefully researched biographies can vividly depict a period in which an individual lived. They can show how people are shaped by the social, economic, intellectual, political, religious, and environmental factors of their time. For example, a world history teacher might assign *Young Man Luther*, by Erik H. Erikson. This study, which incorporates psychoanalysis and history, touches some of the issues of identity and religion that face young people, while giving them insights into the world of Luther and the Reformation. Students could compare the Reformation world with the post-modern world by looking at the concerns of students living in both time periods, and deciding what choices would be valid. Likewise, a good biography of Columbus will help students understand the changing world of the 15th century. Students could learn

how technology changed the people's way of thinking and operating, and can be asked to compare the impact of current technology on their families.

An excellent person to use in highlighting issues of modern world history is Mahatma Gandhi. His life touched many continents and raises issues that we still confront today. *Gandhi, Prisoner of Hope* by Judith M. Brown seems to do a particularly good job of linking the past with the present. Many of the issues from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are brought together in the life of Gandhi. For example, (1) the nature of British imperialism; (2) the condition of minorities in the colonies; (3) the rise of nationalism; (4) the methods used by the nationalists to gain power; (5) the transfer of culture, including the notion that certain religions are inferior; (6) life-style and politics; (7) the non-violent methods used by Gandhi (most students are surprised that it was in South Africa that Gandhi started his civil disobedience campaigns). More importantly, the role of an individual in a democracy then and now can be addressed. With the recent developments in South Africa, Gandhi's legacy and relevance to the issue of civil and human rights will be more clearly recog-

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nized by the students after they read and analyze his life story.

Ken Wolf, in a recent issue of *Perspectives*, outlined a good case for using biographies in history.⁴ Apart from full-length biographies, anecdotes about how ordinary people cope with their lives will provide students with the tools to deal with problems in their own lives. For example, women in the westward movement across America have usually been omitted, but the recent publication of the diaries of their journey has provided a

Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 by Alfred Crosby and Bartolome de las Casas' *The Devastation of the Indies*, students have developed an awareness of the reasons for the multicultural nature of the Americas. This course was first introduced at Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, in 1992 to coincide with the quincentennial of Columbus' voyages. It has been popular in part because the students see it is relevant.

Other videos can be incorporated into history classes. At the end of an African-

ject relevant.

The computer is also a useful tool for hands-on history teaching. Whether you use it for tutorials, where students can check on themselves immediately, or to display maps, students are generally familiar with the technology and so will use it for historical purposes. Many book companies issue computer packages with their books. Maps and historical simulation games on the computer can make learning fun in the history class. This area has been underutilized in the history classroom.

Biographical videos are also useful because they give the students a clearer picture of a particular time period. Sometimes it is difficult for students to understand a past era because it seems so alien to their present world. A world with no electric lights, cars, trains, or airplanes is difficult to comprehend in a world of lasers, computers, and interactive telephone lines. A film on Frances Perkins, the first woman labor secretary, called *You May Call Her Madam Secretary* highlights the age in ways that words could not. In the past, teachers could often refer to popular books students had read that could

help them understand a period better. Now teachers can use films in the same way. For example, *Howard's End*, or *Passage to India*, *Malcolm X*, or *Schindler's List* can be referred to for appropriate time periods.

Another way to make history relevant to students is involve them in the process of history by linking their family to the historical process. One history teacher has even filmed the account of a student's family history for his Latin American history class called "Exploring Our Past."⁵ Other teachers and students have had equally rewarding experiences as the students traced three generations of women in their families. Still others have utilized the variety of ethnic backgrounds in their classes to have students research their origins, as well as the festivals and important

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fuller picture of life then, which helps students relate and identify with the period better.

A second way to make history relevant is through the innovative use of technology—not as a gimmick but as a part of the learning environment. Most of today's college students have grown up in a world of pictures. Not the two-dimensional pictures of textbooks but moving ones on television, videos, or computer games. The wise history teacher will utilize technology to help students analyze their world. An entire course, "Columbus and His World" was built on the idea that a video picture is worth more than 10 good lectures. Through use of the PBS series, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*, and its companion book, plus a biography of Columbus; *The Columbian Exchange*:

American history class, clips from shows that students might have seen on television were shown and discussed. This connected events from the past with students' lives and better enabled them to analyze the past, understand the present, and prepare for the future. Set in the 19th century to early 20th century, the documentary, *Frederick Douglass: When the Lion Wrote History*, provides a timely forum for discussion of gender, race, and political power.

A valuable PBS series called *Legacy* deals with six civilizations in different parts of the world, including India, China, Iraq, and Egypt. There also are good series on China, Japan, and Arab countries, as well as other areas of the world. Teachers of social history can find an abundance of material to make their sub-

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cultural activities from their past. As a result, students have been able to share with their parents, and history came alive for them. Oral history projects can also include examining national and international events and their impact on the local community. For example, students might investigate the impact of the Great Depression or World War II on their families or the local community.

A little extra creativity by the teacher can produce meaningful activities to inspire students to enjoy history. Students often see documents as dry and boring, but if they can relate to the topic, they usually forget that it is a historical document. One group of students began to read "boring documents" about the Puritans in New England after having been given the article "The Puritans and Sex."⁶

Diaries, newspapers, coins, local architecture, and letters can all be used to make history relevant for students. Students can participate in the process. The teacher can solicit their suggestions about ways to make history more relevant to them.

History teachers at all levels must find ways to make sure that students see the story of humankind as valuable in understanding their present world.

Ideas for innovative history teaching can be found in almost every issue of the American Historical Association newsletter, *Perspectives*. Teachers can experiment with many of these ideas. High school teachers will find helpful resources in the bulletins from the National Council for Social Studies.

Students usually come to college expecting rote learning in their history classes. You can surprise them by making the classes exciting and relevant by utilizing a variety of methods that get them hooked on history. ☞

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5. Louisa Schell Hoberman, "The Immigrant Experience and Student-Centered Learning: An Oral History Video Project" in *Perspectives* 32:3 (March 1994), pp. 1, 13.
6. See Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *The New England Quarterly* 25:4 (December 1942), pp. 591-607.