

Seven Rules for Effective History Teaching or Bringing Life to the History Class

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Over the years I have been asked on occasion to speak at different gatherings of precollegiate history educators about more effective ways to teach history to high school students. Sometimes I focused on incorporating primary sources into classroom discussions. Other times I concentrated on using local issues. Four years ago, when I was asked to conduct a workshop for social studies teachers in Albany, Georgia, I pulled together and presented to the teachers the various ways that I had stimulated the interests of my students at Albany State University. In the last three years at the Organization of American Historians, I have had the opportunity to travel around the country and talk with precollegiate teachers, and this summer I dusted off those "seven rules" I had pulled together earlier in Georgia and shared them with Advanced Placement history teachers gathered in San Antonio as well as with teachers from around the country attending summer institutes on teaching the civil rights movement held in Jackson, Mississippi, and Atlanta, Georgia.

When I returned to Bloomington, I thought of the wider audience that could be reached through the *OAH Magazine of History*. Several of us in the executive office thought it might be good to establish in the *Magazine* a column in which American historians could share those techniques they have found to be most effective in their teaching careers. So in what we hope will become a regular feature, we will inaugurate the column in this issue with "Seven Rules for Effective History Teaching."

Rule One: Enthusiasm!

Enthusiasm is the first and most important way to bring life to any classroom. Your own enthusiasm for the topic and teaching is the key to success. Any lack of enthusiasm is unfair to the students. What is enthusiasm? Traced back to its ancient Greek origins, it means the spirit with or in you. In other words, enthusiasm is "something inspiring zeal or fervor." Teachers need to be inspired and they need to inspire their students. To be inspired, you must love what you teach. You need to know your subject and learn something more about it each day. And you must make what you teach a part of you. When your students see and understand these qualities, they should be inspired and enthusiastic about learning American history.

Rule Two: Rely less on textbooks

Too many history textbooks tend to be dull, boring, and bland. You cannot really eliminate the textbook entirely, but you should not make it your sole authority. Let the textbook guide the outline for the course, but teach from other sources, especially primary sources, as well. Pick the best historical sources that are a pleasure to read. For example, when you study American slavery, have your students read *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and/or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors*, and W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folks* shed much light on post-Civil War America while Melba Patillo Beal's *Warriors Don't Cry* provides a very moving account of an African American high school student's experience of integrating Little Rock's Central High School. These are all primary sources and there are plenty of other great examples you can use. You should choose sources that have had the greatest impact on you. Not only will they inspire the students, but you can also teach them with passion.

Preparation is the key to making the most of these sources. Give students questions that will get them to look for important ideas and points while they read.

Rule Three: Use well-written secondary sources

Secondary sources are critical for contextualizing and making sense of those rich firsthand sources. Although you may or may not assign these works, it is your job to prepare your students by giving them the background they need to fully understand the primary sources. And secondary sources provide that framework or context.

Rule Four: Look at the things that matter today

Stop thinking of history as battles and wars, kings and presidents and start thinking in terms of race, class, and gender. Today, these things matter very much in our lives. Sexuality and geography or location are equally important. This is how we identify ourselves. If we are going to teach tolerance, we are going to have to teach respect for different races, classes, genders, and sexualities. With older high school students, you may even be able to introduce the idea of how we construct these categories.

Rule Five: Use generous amounts of local history to teach American and World History

Some historical development may make a lot more sense to a student if he or she can see a local manifestation of it. For example, teaching the three phases of Reconstruction -- Presidential, Radical, and Redemption -- could really bore students if not done well. If you happen to be teaching in the South, try handing out a copy of a contract signed by a local planter and his former slaves the summer after emancipation. This exercise does several things: it demonstrates a primary source; it shows what Reconstruction meant to ordinary people--a planter and freedpersons on his plantation; and it gets the students to interact

with the past. These historical figures are real flesh and blood folks right there in the county in which you teach. I guarantee students will remember Reconstruction a lot better than if they had just read about it in the textbook.

Alternatively, ask students to read local newspaper accounts of Reconstruction. What did the editor think of the changes accompanying emancipation? What impact did it have on his or her readers' everyday lives?

You can even use local history in teaching world history. Several years ago, when I taught world history in Georgia, we focused on the new consumerism in the 1920s by looking at advertising, especially by department stores. First, I provided a brief history of the department store and the ways in which these stores created the desire for their goods through newspaper ads--leading to a democratization of desire. How do you get people to buy things? What are their values? How do the ad men appeal to them? We used *Discovering the Global Past: A Look at the Evidence* by Merry E. Wiesner, William Bruce Wheeler, Frederick M. Doeringer, and Melvin E. Page (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, 2: 320-42) which included department store ads from newspapers in the United States, Great Britain, France, Brazil, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. The commonalities in advertising in all these countries were clearly visible in the ads.

So I assigned each student a year in the 1920s and asked them to go to the public library to look for department store ads in the local newspaper, the *Albany Herald*. They had to bring a photocopy of a typical ad to class; explain it; and determine what it was trying to sell and to what values it was trying to appeal (e.g., thrift, status, etc.). Sometimes you will encounter unexpected results. As we looked at the ads, we noticed those in the early 1920s seemed to target men, while the ones in the late 1920s tended to target women. So we discussed what that suggested about changes in advertising and in culture.

You can use local newspapers in a variety of ways. How did local people deal with World War II on the homefront? How did the war affect advertising? What values were important in the 1940s compared to the 1920s? You might have them locate the issue of the local paper for the day they were born--or the day their mother or father was born. What was the important news of that day? What were merchants advertising? What were the values visible in the ads?

Rule Six: Use music and film to appeal to those senses not necessarily stimulated by reading

Music can touch the emotions in a unique way. Starting a discussion with a song can break the ice we so often struggle with in starting a class discussion. Help the students develop their listening skills by printing out the lyrics of the songs for them. It demonstrates how important those words are to you and it especially helps them to understand songs sung in a different dialect. Do not hesitate to play different versions of a song to illustrate how people can take a song from

one context and reshape it for another purpose. A good example of that is the labor movement song, "Which Side Are You On?" which was altered to become an important song of the civil rights movement. Other civil rights songs came straight out of the black church, illustrating the link between that institution and the movement. Songs can also convey very different feelings if they are performed for an audience at a concert as opposed to being captured on tape as part of a mass meeting.

Film, too, can be a powerful way to get your students' attention. But be careful not to use films to replace teaching. Instead, teach the film! Tell your students what to look for in the film. Stop the film at critical points and get feedback from them. Do not feel compelled to show the film in its entirety. Use the film as you would any other source. Some films you want to teach in their entirety, just as you would assign the entire brief autobiography of Frederick Douglass. You may wish to use only portions of other films just as you would have them read parts of newspapers and magazines rather than the entire issue. Remember, the film is a tool to help you better convey a deeper understanding of the historical period you are teaching.

Rule Seven: Become more computer literate

Learn about the ways in which the Internet can enrich your teaching. Sign up for a listserv in your field. There are listservs for history teachers, for American history, world history, and every imaginable branch of the field. Find out the best web sites for the topics you are teaching and pass them on to your students and then discuss what they are learning on those sites. Just as you teach them how to discriminate between useful and poor historical printed sources, you must teach them to use the same discrimination with electronic sources. For years, we taught our students that just because it is printed in a book does not make it true. Now we have to make very clear that just because it is on the Internet does not make it true. What is the source of the information? Is it reliable? How can you tell? Not only will they have a better understanding of the past, but they are learning a skill they can use in other aspects of their lives.

When you make history exciting for your students, they are motivated to learn more and thus develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of the past. So start or continue incorporating Enthusiasm, Primary Sources, well-written Secondary Sources, Current Issues, Local History, Music and Film, and the New Technology into your teaching--your students will be grateful for the challenging stimuli you provide them.

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