

“American History’s Problem with Standardized Testing”

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The humanities often suffer in a world driven by technology. Many of today’s secondary students see computers as their best opportunity for employment, and for this reason spend less time and effort on history. They fail to see how this nation’s past can open doors to new avenues in the future. The problem lies in relating antiquated material to modern students. To the average student, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson have been clouded in the folklore of tall tales since they were children. The key is to make these figures human. Washington and Jefferson made mistakes just like all of us do. Bringing these folk heroes down to earth helps students gain a better understanding and appreciation for just how important American historical figures are.

Why do American kids struggle with American history?

The major problem facing history teachers is relating the material to a student’s modern life. Many students feel that history has no purpose when they can receive higher pay in a technology-based field. To combat this, teachers must institute new means of instructing old material. History has already happened and there is no way to spice it up when necessary. Incorporation of current topics and student interests, however, can make even the driest material engaging and thought provoking.

A factor that directly effects how and why American students struggle with American history is the role of standardized testing. Most history teachers would agree

that the standardized test is the necessary evil of the discipline. The nature of the study of history involves comprehension of most, if not all the material. If a secondary student has focused all of his/her academic efforts on one group, they have missed the big picture. Specialized study is fine for a project but is suicide for a semester. As a secondary teacher, it is my job to send my students to college with knowledge of concepts. If they choose to go to college, it is then the professor's job to focus their studies on a subset of history.

What should the Role of Standardized Testing be?

So what role should standardized testing play in an American history curriculum? Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser examined that question in their article, "Will That Be on the Exam: The Role of Testing in Teaching and Learning American History." They agree that standardized testing is important, but it does not deserve to be the deciding factor in a student's success or failure. The tests instead should only be used as a means to measure a student's comprehension of the material. Their solution is to reformat the test. They cited a work by Sam Wineberg that tracked the history of standardized testing. Wineberg's research showed that standardized tests are consistent; whereby students struggle with the same questions. Kornblith and Lasser's findings suggest that both the tests and curricula need to be reformatted annually for standardized tests to remain as a good means of assessment.¹

Sheldon Stern presented a different perspective in his article, "Beyond the Rhetoric: An Historian's View of the National Standards for United States History." Stern completely disagreed with the current national teaching standards for history. He

asserted that the way students are tested does not account for their ability to understand the intricacies and controversies of American history. The largest problem is a term that Stern defines as “presentism.” Presentism is judging solely in terms of the norms and values of today. Teaching history in this manner presents students with the view that historical figures simply made mistakes and contributed little to modern society. This is not the goal of instruction, but what is expected by the national standards forces teachers to teach it that way.²

What do we do?

With criticisms stated, the question that remains is how to help today’s students. The key is to engage your students and express the importance of the material. The age-old questions of *why should we learn this, we’re only going to forget it anyway*, is valid. If the importance of history is not conveyed, students will forget what they learned after the exam. Jonathan Zimmerman stated that, “students will never master the important facts of history unless they discuss the meaning and significance of this information.” Zimmerman also added that history teacher must know their history. Nearly half of America’s history teachers have no degree or even a minor in history.³ If a teacher gives an assignment, he/she should have at least a working knowledge of that period of history. Too many times, teachers simply assign lessons from the textbook with no real understanding of the material themselves.

What needs to be done?

William Gaudelli presented an interesting viewpoint in why American students struggle on standardized American history tests. He splits history teachers into four groups: the perennialist, the essentialist, the constructivist, and the multiculturalist. The perennialist believes history is important because it is what the contemporary world is based on. They believe that without knowledgeable historians, the past will be misinterpreted or lost for future generations. The essentialist believes that history is necessary for success. The study of history reinforces important skills such as research and writing. The constructivist believes that the only way to teach history is to relate it to students' daily lives. The instructor exists as a guiding force to facilitate student self-discovery. The multiculturalist believes that history should be presented from the viewpoint of minorities such as women, Native Americans, or African Americans. They feel that since these groups have been ignored in the past, they should be put to the forefront now.⁴

Gaudelli stated history is the hardest subject to test because of these different vantage points. Standardized tests in turn can be based around any one historical philosophy. An instructor may be teaching the correct material, but from a vantage point that does not match that of the test. This problem is nearly impossible to combat. A universal curriculum is an option; however, the study of history is constantly changing. Even if the study of history could be universalized, the trends of how it is taught continually change.

What works?

The best way to relate American history to your students is through performance-based assessments. We established that it is vital to relate the material to your students. The best way to do this is to make them do something. The use of performance-based assessments also makes it easy to incorporate differentiated instruction strategies, such as flexible grouping and jigsawing. You can group your students in various ways to help learning. Cooperative education can occur in groups based upon learning styles, ability level, or even general interests. You can jigsaw the activity by assigning each group a piece of the material you are teaching. Each group then presents their findings to complete the process.

These exercises do not replace the background material, they just reinforce it. The outline of one performance-based assessment I use is below.

Title: Colonization in the Americas

- I. Present background information to students. This could be in the form of notes or lecture.
- II. Assess. Make sure your students understand the material. Performance-based assessments are useless if students do not comprehend the basics.
- III. Performance-based Assessment. Put your students into flexible groups. Assign them a fictitious piece of land. Explain to them that it is their job to colonize it and make a profit for the mother country. What they need to accomplish is set up in the GRASPS model (Goal, Role, Audience, Situation, Product, Standards for

Success). Include requirements such as establishing laws, writing a charter, and find an economic base. A rubric is a great tool for assessing their work.

All students can learn, and standardized tests should be one of, but not the only, avenue used to foster that outcome. In the discipline of history, the focal point should be how to make the material understandable and meaningful. Performance based assessments can incorporate all learning types and multiple intelligences. The instruction should be fair, flexible, and differentiated. A general lack of interest in humanities can be combated by making history meaningful to students. Tell them why it is important. Make history a story that is full of interesting personalities, political battles, and military engagements. Standardized testing will at times contradict with critical thinking exercises, seeing as content is undoubtedly vital to most history classes. The solution to this problem is to differentiate instruction. Incorporate cross curricular Standards of Learning into these activities. For example, the performance task above incorporates Pennsylvania standards in reading, writing, listening, history, and geography.

The keys are to make it meaningful, differentiated for the sake of all learners, and make you students think. Critical thinking skills and performance based assessments can help your instruction and be incorporated with NCLB standards. The goal is for students to learn in a safe, fair, and flexible environment. Consolidation of the best strategies, critical thinking exercise, and standardized tests when necessary can help you achieve this.

¹ Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser, "Will That Be on the Exam: The Role of Testing in Teaching and Learning American History," The Journal of American History, March 2004, 1379-1380.

² Sheldon M. Stern, "Beyond the Rhetoric: An Historian's View of the National Standards for United States History," Journal of Education 176 (1994): 63.

³ Jonathan Zimmerman, "Don't know much about history? Why not," Education Week 21 (2002): 37.

⁴ William Gaudelli, "U.S. Kids Don't Know U.S. History: The NAEP Study, Perspectives, and Presuppositions," The Social Studies, September/November 2002, 197-201.