

American History Unit:
Why Study History?
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Introduction

Goals and Aims

So often the study of History has been the study of chronology and facts and the analysis of these. But this in itself does not give many of us a reason or purpose for the study of History. Nor does it improve our ability to think rationally. Does History have any purpose in our daily lives? In our decisions and our way of looking at the world? Can it's study help us to become better thinkers? I have to admit that I think it does and I am seeking in these lessons to transmit that idea to my students as well as facilitating their experience and understanding of the intellectual process of thinking with others about broad statements and possibly unexamined presuppositions.

The goal of this unit is to facilitate students' development of "habits of mind" through an analytical process and to engage them in creating their own historical perspective concerning the questions "What can history teach us?" and "Why study history?".

Rational

Before we can answer the question of why study History, we have to first have an idea of what the study of History can teach us. For students to answer that question for themselves is the aim and goal of this unit. In examining and analyzing three broad statements that are in common usage, students are given an opportunity to experience and understand how a presupposition or view of the world can color their study of History.

Peter Abelard, a teacher/philosopher, who lived from 1079-1142, developed a method which he called systematic doubting. It is described in his book, Sic et Non, or Yes and No. Abelard used contradictory statements from the church fathers or the Bible and taught his students to analyze them by entertaining both sides as truth. By doubting, and using discussion and analysis he might say, we come to questioning and by questioning we perceive truth.

This experience in the method of systematic doubting can be generalized to many areas of a student's life both personal and as a member of the world's communities. It is a method for hearing all sides and for respecting minority opinion. And it teaches us to examine what we think and believe with an open mind, to entertain other perspectives.

Examining their own presuppositions will enable students to verbalize what they think history can teach them about themselves, their place in the world and the meaning of world events. The second part of the rational is for students to experience an intellectual process where there are no absolute right answers, but the questions are the important thing for their intellectual growth.

This unit is aligned with national and state content and performance standards and learning expectations in the social studies.

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

Standards in Historical Thinking

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

The student comprehends a variety of historical sources:

- C. Identify the central question(s) a historical narrative addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.
- B. Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- E. Distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence.

- H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered, new voices heard, and new interpretations broached.
- I. Evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.
- J. Hypothesize the influence of the past, including both the limitations and opportunities made possible by past decisions.

Alaska State Content Standards History

- A) A student should understand that history is record of human experiences that links the past to the present and the future.

A student who meets the content standard should:

- 3) recognize different theories of history, detect weakness of broad generalization, and evaluate the debates of historians;
- 4) understand that history relies on interpretation of evidence.

- B) A student should understand historical themes through factual knowledge of time, places, ideas, institutions, cultures, people, and events.

A student who meets the content standard should:

- 3) recognize that historical understanding is relevant and valuable in the student's life and for participating in local, state, national, and global communities;
- 5) evaluate the influence of context upon historical understanding.

- D) A student should be able to integrate historical knowledge with historical skill to effectively participate as a citizen and as a life long learner.

A student who meets this content standard should:

- 1) understand that the student is important in history;
- 3) define a personal position on issues while understanding the historical aspects of the positions and roles assumed by others;
- 4) recognize and demonstrate that various issues may require an understanding of different positions, jobs, and personal roles depending on place, time, and context.

Alaska State Performance Standards

Writing

E.A.1 Write a coherent composition that includes a thesis statement, supporting evidence and a conclusion.

E.A. 2 Use the conventions of standard English.

Instructional Framework

Enduring Understandings

- Continuity and Change are both found in History
- Broad statements/presuppositions need to be examined
- What we “know” from history is interpretation, not absolute
- Rigorous methods of thinking enable us to reach understanding
- The process of systematic doubting is as important as the conclusions we reach.

Essential Questions

- What can we learn from history?
- How do our presuppositions and “World View” affect our study of history?
- Can more than one view of history be right?

Expected Learning Outcomes

At the end of this unit students will be able to:

1. Analyze and interpret broad statements
2. Consider that more than one interpretation/perspective may be

correct.

3. Interview and gather data from others
4. Work within a group to discuss and examine different points of view.
5. Understand that the process may be as or more important than the content in a discussion of differing ideas with others.
6. Take a stand, write a thesis statement and defend it in a composition using reasonable arguments.

Social Studies Content and Skills

Core Concepts and Content

- Continuity/Change
- Broad Statements
- Presuppositions
- World View

Social Studies Skills and Dispositions

Data Gathering Skills

- *Interviewing
- *Compile, organize and evaluate information

Intellectual Skills

- *Classify and Group items into categories
- *Compare things on the basis of similarities and differences
- *Draw conclusions or inferences from reasoning and analysis
- *Be aware of the possibility of more than one “right” answer

Interpersonal Skills

- *See things from the point of view of others
- *Understand one’s own perspective
- *Understand that differing perspectives can all be right
- *Respect for minority opinion
- *Work effectively with others as a group member
- *Participate in a “process” discussion

American History Unit: Why Study History

Finding our perspective through Systematic Doubt

This is a thinking, discussing and writing unit aimed at 10th grade history students. It is intended as an opening unit that allows students to think about and evaluate their own perspective about what we learn from history. As a follow up they will have some basis for determining why we study history. The unit is also an introduction to the process of analyzing statements/suppositions/presuppositions through looking at many perspectives.

LESSON ONE

Time involved: One day in class.

Modality: Full class discussion and small group interaction Forming a group thesis statement

To begin:

Write the following statements on the board or overhead:

“Nothing is constant but change”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same”

“There is nothing new under the sun”

Briefly ask students if they have ever heard these statements and or others like them. Explain that they are broad statements but may have something for us to learn inherent in them. Take time to check for understanding and to add any statements suggested by the class.

Divide students into small groups.

Task:

Pick a scribe to capture their thoughts on paper and a spokesperson to present their perspective to the class.

In their small groups students are to discuss the statements and decide as a group which one is correct. Once they have made that decision they need to come up with a thesis statement and some reasons and examples to support their opinion. They also need to note the consequences or ramifications of their perspective as well as it's relationship to the study of history.

NOTE: It is important that the students know what a thesis statement is so review if necessary.

Return to full class discussion.

NOTE: If it is not already established, this is the time to outline the norms of class discussions. Mine are that no one interrupts or rebuts people as they speak. Each speaker or spokesperson has their say without judgment or agreement or disagreement. Once all the opinions are on the floor, discussion begins. Teacher facilitates. Respect for minority opinion is the norm. No personal attacks like...”that’s just stupid”. You can say “I see it a different way”...This is a time to learn the process of having a discussion with many different opinions and perspectives. Teacher models acceptance of all opinions.

During discussion, teacher lists important points on board or overhead. Students may also take notes.

As discussion progresses, teacher facilitates the understanding of consequences and ramifications of the different opinions expressed.

To conclude, teacher may say something like “let’s explore this more with....”

Formative Assessment: During full class discussion and as small groups are at work, teacher checks for understanding and facilitates a deeper and more complete process.

LESSON TWO

Time involved: A part of a class period to give outside assignment and then one class period after data is collected for full class discussion.

Modalities: Full class discussion and interviewing as homework assignment

Tell the class:

Each student will interview three to five people about their perspective on history. They are encouraged to seek out a diverse group in age especially.

(Thinking points to get the interview going: We are all born and die, have families, have to get food. And what about work, communities, governing, religion/spirituality?)

The question is:

What throughout history do you think is

still the same

changed

They can develop a sheet like the above for each interview and another to compile their data. In compiling their data students need to ask themselves if they see any patterns, any surprises?

Now each student is armed with some raw data and some inferences from it to present to the next class discussion.

In this discussion each student presents their data and conclusions from their data. Then the class has a full class discussion. During this discussion the facilitator/teacher can gently introduce the concepts of presupposition and world view as well as the question: "What can we learn from studying History?". This leads to possible ideas about underlying themes, patterns, principles and how these may be part of their world view.

Formative Assessment: Continue to check for understanding especially to see if a perspective is emerging. Students can also be graded or give points for the thoroughness and quality of their data collection.

LESSON THREE

Time involved: One class period to complete free write and share in small group. One or Two more days if teacher elects to have compositions read and discussed in class.

Modalities: Free Write, thesis statements, composition, discussion in full class and small groups

Writing Assignment:

Free Write: Begin with a five minute Fast/Free write on the question: “Why study history?”.

Small Group:

When free writes are complete, have students return to small groups from the first day to share their free writes. Have each student share and/or develop a thesis statement during this small group time.

Full Class Discussion:

Each person shares their thesis statement and it is written on board. This is not the time to rebut, but it is the time for teacher to model acceptance of different perspectives, minority opinion and the nuances expressed.

Formative Assessment: To see if each student has developed a working thesis statement. If not this is a point where the teacher can coach the individual student so that they can complete the next task.

Composition:

Each student is then to write a composition (min two pages) on the topic of Why study History.

The composition needs a thesis statement and supporting arguments. They may use the fast write. They may use what they have learned from the interviews and class discussions.

NOTE: Since the summative assessment will use the six traits of writing with a focus on the traits of Ideas and Content, Organization and

Voice, this is the time to introduce student rubrics and discuss same if these norms have not been previously established. A sample Student Rubric is attached.

When compositions are complete, teacher may have students read them to the class and initiate another discussion, or score them with notes using the six traits of writing.

Summative Assessment is with the six traits of writing rubric with a focus on the traits listed above.