

Teaching High School World History: Did State and National Standards Eliminate the Teaching of Current Events?

In the not-too-distant past, students and social studies teachers participated in a time-honored affair known as Current Events Day. At regularly scheduled intervals, students scoured newspapers and magazines to discover intriguing articles; while educators reveled in the opportunity to make associations between the material being covered in the classroom and the affairs occurring outside those four walls. As a student, I enjoyed the change of pace and witnessing my teachers spin a web from the past to the present and even across various topics as each new current event was presented. As a new teacher, in the early 1990s, I eagerly anticipated these sessions as well. They offered an opportunity for the students to lead the discussion and a time where not knowing what topics we might cover on any given day: economic theory, elections, war, or a more local issue such as the debate surrounding potential location of a new library, provided both excitement and pedagogical challenge. This time spent building connections between the past and present encompassed many essential pieces of an engaging, thoughtful, culturally relevant social studies classroom.

However, with the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and its successor the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Common Core) in 2009, teachers at the elementary level began spending less time teaching social studies and instead focused on reading and math.¹ Since neither history nor social studies were tested by either of these federal programs, and therefore were not directly related to the accountability standards and high-stakes testing facing teachers and elementary school administrators throughout the United States, schools chose to focus more time on those academic areas tested, primarily math and reading.² However, it was not only elementary teachers forced to adapt. High school social studies teachers faced a host of challenges as well. Although their subject matter may not have been assessed on these national tests, at the urging of the federal government,³ states, like Minnesota, developed content-specific curricular standards.⁴ And in order to ascertain the ability of

students to master the content contained within those standards, most states, including Minnesota, instituted standardized state level testing.⁵ This added pressure caused many teachers to become frustrated because they simply did not have enough time to cover all of the subject matter contained within the numerous standards.⁶ These same teachers also struggled as students were now arriving in their classrooms without the requisite vocabulary and the basic concepts of history, geography, and government because it was no longer being taught in the elementary schools.⁷ And to add to the disappointment, educators felt that they no longer had the autonomy to choose between culturally relevant content and that which was required within the state-wide curriculum standards.⁸ After nearly thirty years of standards and high-stakes testing, I feared that current events might have disappeared from the high school world history classroom.

Teachers who strictly followed state level standards would be unlikely to find current events included there because even when states attempted to include present-day events those quickly become outdated. For instance, although the Minnesota state standards includes a standard regarding modern-day globalization as it relates to capitalism and the end of the Cold War, neither China's reemergence nor the Russian invasion of Chechnya are included as examples.⁹ Similarly, this phenomenon occurs within world history textbooks. And yet during this period of constant bombardment via social media surrounding both political and social events, it felt like a crucial time for teachers and students to be engaged in bridging these contemporary events to the past, rather than simply digesting headlines and sound bites or worse yet ignoring them completely. So, my research set out to determine how experienced world history teachers in Minnesota were choosing what content would be included in their classroom, including the possibility of discussing and dissecting timely topics from across the world. What I found thrilled me and should bring hope for all teachers committed to building connections between the past and the present.

Methodology

In brief, this research was limited to teachers in Minnesota with at least five years of experience teaching world history. This research followed an exploratory sequential design, where the qualitative method helped to produce the quantitative method.¹⁰ Specifically, this study utilized a qualitative analysis of interviews, generally about an hour long, to develop a theory regarding the processes used by experienced world history teachers in making curricular decisions for their classroom. To recruit experienced world history teachers, a request for participation in a research-based interview was distributed by the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals to each of its 1085 member schools who forwarded the request to their world history teachers. From the larger group, a small purposive sample of five teachers meeting the

initial qualifications, but also representative of the gender of social studies teachers across the state of Minnesota, were contacted to schedule an interview. Specifically, the participants in the interview portion consisted of one teacher from a large urban school district, two teachers coming from suburban districts, one teacher from a smaller unit district, and the last from a rural school district. Three of those interviewed identified as male, with the other two educators identifying as female. All the teachers had significantly more than the minimum requirement of five years of experience teaching world history.

The second, quantitative phase, tested the validity of the theory through a survey instrument delivered to a large sample of experienced world history teachers throughout Minnesota. This Likert-type, ordinal scale survey, created using Qualtrics, was distributed via an electronic link through a variety of teacher organizations including the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals in an attempt to reach as many experienced world history teachers as possible. The scale scored from one for strongly disagree up to five for strongly agree. A disappointingly small number of teachers fully completed the survey limiting the generalizability of the results. However, despite the lack of generalizability, the results did present a strikingly similar picture to the five teachers who were interviewed. Within this article, I chose to focus on the compelling teacher interviews.

Results from the Teacher Interviews

In balancing the myriad requirements placed upon world history classrooms, teachers have been conferred with the title, curricular-instructional decisionmakers or gatekeepers.¹¹ “When teachers act as gatekeepers in the planning process, they transform some identified body of knowledge into curriculum and instructional strategies for some identified group of students.”¹² So, I was curious, had governmental mandates become the curricular gatekeeper or did that power reside with the teachers? Based on the research sharing teacher frustration and dismay, I anticipated that teachers would lean heavily on state and national standards to guide the content of their classrooms. Yet through the teacher interviews, I was able to identify *several* elements which these experienced world history teachers in Minnesota used to develop curricular content including their colleagues, textbooks, current events, Common Core standards, Minnesota State World History Standards, and the ethnic and the racial background of the students in their classrooms. Additionally, through the quantitative survey phase, I ascertained the relative importance of each of these elements. Those results are displayed in Figure 1, with the scale scored from one for strongly disagree up to five for strongly agree. I had expected the content-laden standards to drive the curriculum, but that was simply not the case. And though current events were not explicitly included in the Minnesota State World History Standards or the nation-wide Common Core

standards, teachers were opening their classroom and allowing the discussion of current events. In fact, the teachers felt that current events influenced their classroom planning on par with their colleagues. Despite the mandates and testing, teachers remained the instructional decision-makers concerning the content in their classroom.

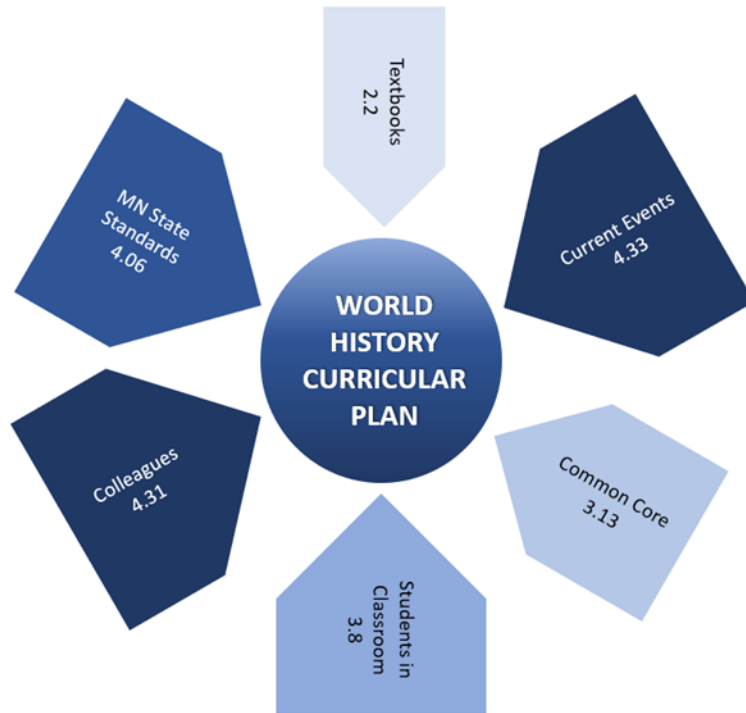


Figure 1: *Process used by Experienced High School World History Teachers in Minnesota to Determine Course Content*, Ferrero, Kathleen. “Understanding How Experienced World History Teachers in Minnesota Choose Course Content: A Mixed Methods Study.” Dissertation, Minnesota State University, 2021.

This finding was most clearly demonstrated through a question which asked the teachers how they would handle a student requesting additional information about 9/11 or ISIS during a lesson about the spread of Islam. It is important to note that neither of these topics are included within the Minnesota State World History Standards nor in the Common Core. All the teachers attested that they would absolutely address the student question and examine the topic. And in this specific case, they would also make it clear that Islam is only tangentially related to those concepts. Here are a few quotes from the teachers:

- “I would try to let the students speak and really my first question should be where are you coming from? What is it that you really want to know? I would tie

it back to what we have already learned and how government and religion, you know, this very interesting relationship moves forward.” – Christine

- “I would certainly talk about the issues underlying it, why Islam and 9/11 are two separate events in the sense that religion in this respect, in any respect, I would bring them to the point that you can’t blame the religion for what happened.” – Kirk
- “I always explain that there are those who use Islam like the KKK uses Christianity. It’s all a front, it’s all about politics, and economics, and control and a lot of men who feel insecure about themselves. They have lost control of what they once had and are seeking and kind of way to reassert their hegemony by using violent and obtuse methods. That always gets the discussion moving!” – Scotty

Educators cannot anticipate all student questions, but without exception these instructors were willing to discuss topics brought to the classroom, even when it represented an idea outside the bounds of state and national standards. Clearly, these five teachers did not allow the state and national standards to limit the topics they were willing to include within their classrooms.

Although the teachers were open to the idea of tackling unexpected timely topics, they were also committed to using utilizing current events as a tool to connect the past to the present, to help students learn to think like historians.¹³ Universally these teachers wanted to utilize the past in order for their students to understand the present. Christine shared that she was mindful when looking at current events and indicated that she liked to “unpack them backwards” when she got the chance. For instance, she had her students study the Uyghur Muslims in China and try to determine what policies in China’s past had led them to this current situation. Echoing those thoughts, Janice shared, “But I do try to draw, frequently try to draw parallels from world history to the present day.” Kirk was perhaps the most purposeful, he discussed that he used current events as a daily “launch pad.” “We will start each day with just a little bit of a current event – here’s what’s going on in the world and then use the history to kind a go here’s where this came from. It’s not a new idea or if it is a new idea, here’s its roots in some other event. So, we can always find those connections and I’m really big on connections. Looking at current events gives us the connections.” After listening to these educators explain how they employ current events, it became clear why it was the largest driver of their classroom content. They wanted their students to understand why history matters.

Using Current Events in the Classroom

Well before the implementation of the NCLB and the Common Core, researchers and teacher’s colleges across the United States advocated that every teacher should read a quality newspaper as well as provide a quality newspaper for their students.¹⁴ That focus

continued through the social studies teaching methods textbooks of the late 1990's. Across all grade levels, these manuals portrayed multiple approaches to presenting current events and identified the requisite skills for both understanding and interpreting information about contemporary issues.¹⁵ And further, when Haas and Laughlin surveyed elementary, middle, and high school teachers in 1999, they discovered that 95% of the respondents indicated that the teaching of current events was considered either "important" or "essential."¹⁶ Even right after the implementation of NCLB, Barton and Levstik shared in their work that engaging in inquiry surrounding current events could help students and teachers build the skills required to allow for healthy and productive discussions in our democratic society.¹⁷ Clearly the educational field recognized the importance of current events.

Today, however, a quick search of cutting-edge research simply does not yield those same results. No longer do we find research focused on how to effectively utilize current events in social studies classrooms. Nor do we find teacher preparation programs concentrating time and effort on the topic. Yet with the National Council for the Social Studies introduction of the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework in 2013, one may have expected to see current events once again take a lead due to its focus on developing an active citizenry able to "identify and analyze public problems."¹⁸ Using current events and allowing students to choose individual topics of interest can help to bring voice to those topics and people that are often marginalized or ignored in today's textbooks such as Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) or those identifying with an LGBTQ+ affinity group.¹⁹ Classrooms where students help to create content become communities where the lives and backgrounds of the students are found inside and therefore the outside world connects in a real way to the lives of the learners.²⁰ Current events provide a way to address several issues present in schools today.

Let's take for example the current COVID-19 pandemic. This timely event could allow teachers and students to explore plagues and pandemics throughout the ages including HIV/AIDS, 1918 flu, 6th Cholera Pandemic, Cocoliztli Epidemic, Smallpox in the Americas, Black Death, and Justinian's Plague to name a few. Teachers can ensure that many cultures are represented. Students could practice historical thinking skills, such as change and continuity over time, while comparing these health tragedies. Mapping the spread of the various viruses allows for increased geographic awareness as well as potentially leading toward a comparison of the spread of the disease to the prominent trade routes from the same historical time frame. Next, the class could engage in historical interpretation as students determine whether or not a connection between trade and illness exist. By examining how history relates to the here and now, students will begin to understand that the news headlines of today do not occur in a vacuum.

On a related note, students could read current event articles regarding vaccine hesitancy in the United States, which could lead to learning about the US Tuskegee

syphilis study and then the group could develop arguments regarding how the latter might cause the former. Alternately classrooms could research the history of vaccines across the world and learn that ample evidence suggests the Chinese were the first to utilize inoculation and then the practice spread to Turkey and Africa before heading to Europe and eventually to the Americas. A logical follow-up to that lesson might be searching out a variety of important medical procedures and discovering which country is first credited with the innovation. What a great way to move from Eurocentrism toward an understanding of the entirety of world history.

And with the most recent invasion of Ukraine led by Vladimir Putin, students can examine the importance of Kyiv/Kiev throughout history and the difficulty which Russia and other Balkan states have had over the centuries in juggling the pull of the West and the East: culturally, economically, and politically. Additionally, they could examine various news stories and their presentation of the history involved to do a “fact check” as well as comparing the presentation of social media versus print media to increase their media literacy. Another way to probe this current event would be to set up a debate or Socratic discussion asking whether the Cold War between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. really did end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. All of these recommendations would encourage students to begin to use historical thinking skills.

Final Thoughts

Although this research focused only on teachers in Minnesota, it provides me with great optimism that teachers throughout the United States have not abandoned current events despite the fixation on standards and high-stakes testing. Because of its importance, hopefully teacher preparation programs will once again devote more time and energy to the teaching of current events to ensure their candidates are equipped to utilize them in both effective and creative ways. Barton and Levstik remind us that when educators emphasize the importance of using the past to understand the present, that helps students not only appreciate the general lessons of the past, but it may also influence future actions.²¹ As a world history teacher, I always hoped that my efforts in the classroom would help my students examine the world around them more reflectively ultimately creating an engaged citizen ready to tackle the future. So, let’s bring back Current Events Day!

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Notes

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