

Reflections on Teaching Tenth Graders: Student-Centered, Academically Rigorous, and Comparative World History Courses

For 15 years until I retired four years ago, I taught 10th graders at the O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, a magnet school for which students took an examination to be admitted to it in the 7th, 9th, or 10th grade).¹ The school caters to bright and motivated students from all parts of Boston. Since many students were children of immigrants or were immigrants themselves, and English was their second (or even third language), the school mirrored the demographics of Boston itself. Over time, the school’s mission evolved more into a “STEM” school emphasizing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education designed to prepare students for a future in one of those fields. This worked in part to differentiate from the other two “exam schools,” where the curriculum was more classical, and in part to cater to students who had more interest and/or proficiency in mathematics and/or science.

Yet, the Humanities were (and remain) a part of the curriculum, and students were required to take history courses. A significant subgroup of students liked history and/or government so that there was no lack of motivated and interested students for whom history was an excellent fit. These students generally possessed a mixture of wonderful learning attributes and were at a developmental stage that they could grapple with complicated concepts, as well as to respond to a variety of active student-centered approaches. They were more than capable of asking intelligent and thought-provoking questions, engaging and challenging each other, following directions and working together. Their interest in the world around them, reflecting their diverse backgrounds, meant that they asked keen questions with an enthusiasm was often contagious in the classroom environment. This was, admittedly, an ideal environment to experiment with, and ultimately generate proposals to improve the delivery of 10th grade history that is the focus of this study. However,

these proposals are meant to assist teachers to engage and challenge their students in less enriched settings, need not be used in their entire, and can easily be modified to make them work, and, of course. each of the means advanced here to develop courses that are both student-centered and also academically rigorous are intended to build upon what many teachers are already doing in their classrooms.

Integrating History Courses at the O'Bryant

Based on my interest in curriculum reform, I was interested in seeking ways to improve the overall course sequence at the O'Bryant, I read about efforts to internationalize United States History and talked with like-minded colleagues at a number of schools that had already implemented a course sequence in which United States and World History were taught together. I thereafter worked with others in my department to propose a five-year sequence to replace the typical disjointed and ultimately repetitive traditional history curriculum from 7th through 11th grade. We ended up settling on a course sequence for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade.² During the school year 2006–07 we piloted the 9th grade course (from 1450–1820), a year later we inaugurated the 10th grade course, and in 2008 we added the 11th grade one.

As a result, the tenth-grade course focused only on the 19th century. It revolved around five units of study: Review of the World at the Turn of the 19th Century, Comparative Industrialization in the United Kingdom and the United States, Political Reforms in mid-Century, Nationalism and State Building, and finally Reconstruction, Imperialism, and Conflicts from 1880–1913. Teaching a course that placed the United States in the world allowed students to think critically about the past, contextually, and comparatively.

There is little doubt that the development of this integrated curriculum made more sense to students than the more traditional approach. Through a case study approach, students were taught to investigate essential real-world open-ended questions about the past, which challenged their thinking and encouraged them to learn by analogy, rather than in a strictly linear fashion. Using the comparative approach students were encouraged to investigate why events happened in one place, but not in another and why people may have reacted in different countries differently to the same events and/or were, nonetheless, influenced by them. Students were able to construct meaning out of events, rather than to memorize discrete facts.

The Benefits of Integration: Critical Thinking and Active Learning

Such comparative and thematic approaches helped make national developments more understandable, as students grappled with controversial issues, including revolutions, slavery, nation-states, wars, reforms; all of which could make more sense and lead to the

“A-hah!” moment in such a comparative context. In that way students could do the work of historians and investigate the ways in which an event that happened in one country, nonetheless, could have had far ranging effects beyond their borders. It also facilitated greater higher level thinking skills in students’ processing of specific events. What a joy that made teaching this material with its greater possibilities to rethink how to teach complicated subjects! Students particularly gravitated towards projects that emphasized comparative work and looking at influences beyond borders so that for example in studying the First Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom and the United States, it made sense to look at the influences that one had on the other, rather than to isolate the phenomena.³

Creating and developing such a course meant ultimately that teaching it relied much less on a textbook. These were two dry, school-mandated textbooks that provided necessary background reading, as well as opportunities for critical thinking: one on World History and one on United States History. While the books were: Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Modern World History*, (Nashville: Southwestern Publishers, 1999)) and Paul Boyer, *The American Nation* (New York: Holt Reinhart and Winston, 2001). However, for a short text, I recommend Donald Johnson and Jean Johnson’s *The Human Drama, The World History, From 1450 C.E. to 1900*, Volume III (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2011) in providing the framework that students needed. Each unit required their own materials; we used primarily primary source material from a variety of sources which challenged them, and helped make the course based on critical thinking.⁴ For each unit there was major project that allowed students creatively to make sense of the material in which they learned.

While there was daily homework, quizzes, and traditional exams, much learning was project-based. Learning happened best in interactive ways, including Socratic seminars, jigsaw, skits, paired learning, analysis of images. Innovative curriculum may be great; student access to it, of course, as important. Student-centered learning approaches/techniques were clearly the best ways to engage students and for them to get the most out of the material.

Starting off the year with a roundtable in which students played different people from the 1820s who had political power and/or those who lacked it allowed students to internalize different peoples’ interest, appreciate the importance and the difficulties of dialogue. At the end of the year students concluded the course with another imaginary dialogue about the future of the world in 1913 with a variety of people who wanted to keep the world as it was, others who wanted to improve it, and still others who wanted a new one entirely (in some cases students themselves remembered and compared it to the one in September!). In both cases students had opportunities to show their understanding of the material through imaginative role playing and creative intelligence, as well as clear understanding of historical possibilities. The use of rubrics made the assessment process fair and straightforward, since students knew what was expected of them as they prepared their roles and acted out those identities.

It was clear that the more that students could show their learning on their own or better with others. Should that be surprising? No, educational studies have long argued for the benefit of student-centered approaches, as well as how much teenagers can learn from one another, if they have the proper stimuli to do so. With these approaches they do and allow for a diverse classroom and I, as their teacher, learn more with them than I would in a more traditional model. One wonders why so much learning still is sedentary and alone?

Student Centered Learning: Student Publications

The highlight of my last four years at the O'Bryant was my collaboration with the wonderful writers and editors at 826 Boston, a non-profit youth writing and publishing organization.⁵ Each year we published a book of student work so that by the end of 2017 collectively 288 students (70 in 2014, 85 in 2015, 84 in 2016, and 49 in 2017 respectively) became published authors! While the work of publishing student work had already been established within the English Language Department, my work brought another department onboard. It was energizing to observe my students have a variety of supportive and collaborative roles in this project: as writers, editors, critics, illustrators, designers, organizers, and/or presenters. I was proud and pleased that they could work with the staff from 826 Boston to produce a book with published writings of historical fiction, whether they were memoirs, dialogues, or letters that were historically plausible about a character that they originally played in a skit in class and wrote about that identity/role. Instead of putting away (or even recycling or throwing away!) that project, they now rewrote, extended, and worked on character development and more. These projects both extended my class in that students learned that once they finished a project it was not put on the shelf; rather they extended and improved it, but not alone—rather with their classmates. What an incredibly important skill to learn!

The first two books grew out of the unit on Comparative Industrialization: *Hear Our Voices: Living Ideologies from the United Kingdom, the United States, and China in the 1840s*, and *To Defend, Determine or Defy? Stories from the United Kingdom, the United States, and China in the 1830s and 1840s*.⁶ In the first book, students expanded upon work that they had done in class in which each one described their character's values and together illustrated some of the characters, organized them into 6 readable and coherent chapters. With each other's help they edited, rewrote, and developed titles for themselves. In order to differentiate the second book, we decided to have students work in pairs so that each story showed the influence that the character had had from another person, which took collaboration to another level. It allowed students to work together—which had already started in the class activity—as they thought about and challenged themselves to consider how people influenced one another. Five chapters of memoirs, dialogues, and/or stories illustrated the creativity of these students. In this book students demonstrated their creativity by using

their historical imagination as to where and how some of these characters could have encountered one another and/or demonstrated encounters that may have more unexpected. To cite one example from the second book, which opened with a fascinating dialogue between a merchant from the United States and another from Great Britain arguing over trade in Canton, China. While the dialogue is fictional, it shows a keen possibility of a possible communication.

The last two books came out of the unit on Nationalism and State Building: *To Rejoice, Respect, or Reject? Perspectives of Leadership from China, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom in the late 19th Century* and *To Serve, Support, or Scorn? Perspectives of Leadership from China, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom in the Late 19th Century*.⁷ In both books students' characters shared memoirs, speeches, or letters. In the first of these two books the students organized their work in five chapters from five different perspectives about their leaders and their lives: 1) Appreciation: "Father Stretch my Hand", 2) Critique: "The Fault in Our Leaders"; 3) Pleasure: "Welcome to the Good Life"; 4) Activism: "Fight to the Finish": and 5) Struggle: "Trust Issues". In the final book student work was organized into five chapters from the perspective of five different groups of people, who may have had similar views, but about different leaders: 1) From 12 Lower Class Men: A Fight to Survive? 2) From 9 Noblewomen: Does Money Buy Rights? 3) From 5 Merchants: Wealth or Order? 4) From 8 Noblemen: Custodians of Glorious Moments? and 5) From 15 Lower Class Women: Why Can't We Have a Stable Life? The different perspectives provide the reader was fascinating insights into divergent voices of developed historical fictional characters so that for example this book opened with a critique from a German skilled worker on Bismarck's leadership. The link to the Reading can be found here.⁸

I realize that this opportunity—of allowing my students to publish work—is an anomaly; yet it illustrates the importance of tailoring class activities to real-world transference so that learn what they do means something beyond that one class and then it gets put away somewhere in their brain (or thrown away as quickly as possible!). After all, one of my own joys that I still remember from my own high school in the 1970s is rewriting Hamlet for a (then) modern audience. I hope that my students will remember what they created during their 10th grade history class—a published book with their peers about different perspectives—if they have long forgotten what the perspective may have been!

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maintaining a blog at which an earlier version of this article appears (<https://jamesdiskant.wordpress.com/>). Those interested in a particular assignment mentioned in this article, or in contacting him on related world history subjects, can reach him at james.diskant@verizon.net.

NOTES

¹ Today, the school describes itself as is a “diverse, supportive community of learners that engages in a rigorous and comprehensive Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics program integrated with Humanities.” See the “John O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science,” accessed July 7, 2021, <http://www.obryant.us>.

² See James Diskant, “Makeover Column IV: Engaging Students to Think Comparatively by Placing United States History in a ‘Real’ World History Course” in *World History Connected*, 4, no. 3 (June 2007), accessed July 7, 2021, <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/4.3/diskant.html>, and “Makeover Column VI: Engaging Students to Think Comparatively by Placing United States History in Real’ World History Courses, Part Two” in *World History Connected*, 5, no. 2 (February 2008), accessed July 7, 2021, <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/5.2/diskant.html>.

³ Please email me if you would like some examples at james.diskant@verizon.net.

⁴ If you are interested in some of the materials that were used please email me james.diskant@verizon.net.

⁵ See 826 Boston, A Youth Writing Organization, accessed July 7, 2021, <http://826boston.org>.

⁶ While 826 Boston published these books, they did so in limited editions for students and others at the O’Bryant. Unfortunately, they may not be available for purchase. Contact 826 Boston (see previous endnote) for examples of student work and how to access their services.

⁷ See previous endnote.

⁸ 5/30: Dr. Diskant’s Book Release Party, accessed July 7, 2021, <http://826writersroom.wordpress.com/2017/05/09/dr-diskants-book-release-party/>.