Redrawing the Boundaries: A Constructivist Approach to Combating Student Apathy in the Secondary History Classroom

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WHILE EVERY FIELD OF STUDY presents challenges to the educator, the field of Social Studies and history in particular poses unique obstacles to student success. The issue of scope has been a constant source of anxiety to the history teacher, with new curriculum added with each passing day. Further pressure has been applied to the history teacher in the form of state or locally required common curriculums. This trend, while beneficial in standardizing and guaranteeing curriculum, usually has produced the effect of expanding the content of most classes and programs. Furthermore, the driving force behind most of these new standards has been the need for higher student achievement on standardized tests, forcing teachers to adjust their teaching strategies ("teach to the test"?) and remove favorite or pet topics from their repertoire in order to meet the new requirements.

However, it must be noted that most of these challenges are inherent in the teaching of history. Issues such as time constraints and scope of coverage have been a staple for history teachers for years. The greatest obstacle to student success in the field of history education therefore, is not the product of school administrations or government mandates. Getting students to engage in the study of history, to find relevance in the events of the past, and finally to analyze the effects of change over time is perhaps the most difficult thing history teachers are asked to do.

So how do we combat student apathy, engage all students, and make history relevant? While there is no complete solution to this dilemma, I propose one strategy to increase student engagement through a course with an individualized thematic research and assessment approach that forces students to rewrite historical periods through their own lens. In this way, students construct their own historical understandings. Before examining this approach however, it is prudent to revisit the traditional divisions that exist in historical study, and establish why and how those divisions occur.

History Divided

First, why do we as historians or educators divide history? The obvious answer is that because the scope and scale of history is so vast, separating it into periods or units of study makes its examination more manageable. Historical divisions also provide focused study. In-depth examination of major historical events presents the opportunity to clearly comprehend the major socio-cultural, political, and economic trends as well as the results and reasons for these trends, thereby revealing a coherent emergent chronology. Another obvious reason for the division of history is that logical divisions exist. It seems only natural that modern American history be delineated into the study of events or periods such as the Great Depression, WWII, the Civil Rights Movement, etc. Finally, scholars and educators divide history because this is how the human brain digests information. It is widely accepted that the brain, particularly the adolescent brain, is in flux, and as it is developing, it prefers information in smaller pieces. This complex process of adolescent brain development is a factor that no educator should ignore in their classroom practice. "Learning to support students' frontal lobe development is an enormous challenge."[1]

Examining how we divide history is just as important as discussing why it is divided. Ask any high school teacher of modern American history how their curriculum is organized and invariably you will receive homogenous responses. The typical twentieth-century history course consists of the following units (with slight variations, especially after the 1950s):

Unit 1: Progressivism and Becoming a World Power
Unit 2: World War I
Unit 3: The Roaring Twenties
Unit 4: The Great Depression
Unit 5: World War II
Unit 6: The Cold War
Unit 7: The 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement
Unit 8: The 1960s and the Vietnam War
Units 9,10, etc.: Watergate to the Present

Here the question arises: Why have we structured our curriculum this way and how did these units evolve? Traditionally, curricular units in the field of history have emerged from clear and identifiable political, economic, and socio-cultural events or movements with matters of foreign policy often taking a dominant role. I know within my own classroom I am often asked by my students, "Do we study anything else besides war?" It takes only a cursory glance at the traditional units of study to understand why students might ask such a question. In fact, while economic (The Roaring Twenties, The Great Depression, etc.) and social-cultural (The Roaring Twenties, The Civil Rights Movement, etc.) units are present, it is the foreign policy events of the past, in particular, world conflict and war, that are the predominant areas of study in the typical high school classroom.

The "Border Years" Dilemma

These traditional periods are usually clearly defined by "border years" that signal the end of one unit and the beginning of the next. These "border years" serve to delineate the boundary between units of study and inform students that a great change has taken place that can be identified. In other words, these are before and after years in which students can clearly identify that events or trends are markedly different prior to and following commonly identified eras.

These divisions are dependent upon the perspective in which they operate. For example, the Stock Market Crash of October 1929 was a major symbol of the developing Great Depression. Therefore, students should be able to clearly identify a significant change in the American economy before and after October 1929. Socio-cultural differences should be evident before and after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama on that day in December 1955. American foreign policy shifts should be observable before and after December 7, 1941.

However, the use of "border years" can be problematic. Often, these years are used more for the benefit of the historian rather than arising out of historical fact. For example, when one examines the example of the Stock Market Crash more closely, it becomes clear that the year 1929 may not be an effective "border year":

- *Time Magazine*'s story of the year was Admiral Byrd's journey to the South Pole, *not* the Stock Market Crash.
- Bernard Baruch wired Winston Churchill in November 1929, "Financial Storm Definitely Passed."
- Christmas shopping in 1929 topped that of 1928.
- The stock market actually rose during the last six weeks of 1929 and into 1930.

- *The New York Times* headline for the last day of 1929 read, "A General Price Rise Ends Trading With Wall Street Moderately Bullish for 1930."
- Department of Labor predicted a "splendid employment year" coming up in 1930.[2]

While it is obvious that the Great Depression was an event that was difficult to predict immediately after the market crash, and would eventually take hold in the 1930s, one cannot deny the contradictions that arise when historical fact meets organizational convenience in establishing the start and end years for units of study.

One might argue that the previous example is a dispute over a matter of just a few months. Yet, other examples of problematic border years abound. For example, the events of World War II encompass the years 1939-1945. Most historians would agree however, that careful analysis and discussion of the war cannot occur without studying the allied policies of appeasement in the 1930s, the rise of dictators such as Mussolini as early as the 1920s, and ultimately the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919. While no one would claim that World War II began in 1919, the issues that surround the war cannot be ignored and do not fit neatly into the years of the war itself.

A final example of the challenge of defining boundaries for historical periods can be found in the commonly used terms, "the 50s" and "the 60s." The use of such nomenclature conjures up very specific ideas and images. Descriptions of "the 50s" often involve a time of early Rock and Roll, poodle skirts, idyllic suburban life, economic security, and communist threat. Descriptions of "the 60s" inevitably list hippies, psychedelic drug use, the Vietnam War, and social activism as the defining features. These distinctions are vastly different and imply a marked change in socio-cultural history. But using the decades label is just as problematic as the "border years" model. Close examination of these decades reveals that the great cultural upheaval that defines the two periods occurred not in 1959, but later in 1964 or 1965, thus debunking the decade label as an effective historical period descriptor.

These examples show that traditional historical units can present problems when viewed against historical fact. However, there are some years in which the concept of the "border year" cannot be denied. These "mega years" clearly and unequivocally draw a line before and after which society is vastly different. Possible "mega years" might include the following:

- 1917, in which the U.S. entered World War I, and Russia began its slide towards communism
- 1939, with the official start of hostilities in World War II
- 1945, marking the beginning of the atomic age

- 1968, with its worldwide cultural and political upheavals
- 1989, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the end
   of Soviet communism
- 2001, marking the beginning of the war on terror

These "mega years" are significant in that they reach beyond a single perspective. The year 1968 encompassed political, cultural, and social movements that often were direct reactions to political and foreign policy decisions.

A New Perspective

Reexamining the use of the "border year" to define historical periods forces teachers and students to rethink our view of history and move beyond traditional historical perspectives. The history of early twentieth-century American music for example, encompasses an entirely different set of "border years." This non-traditional perspective might look something like this:

- 1900, Jazz develops in New Orleans
- 1907, Ziegfeld Follies begins
- 1911, Ragtime craze at its height
- 1920, Tin Pan Alley becomes center of popular music
- 1925, Grand Ole Opry radio show debuts
- 1935, Swing at its height
- 1947, Mahalia Jackson inaugurates the "Golden Age of Gospel"
- 1951, Allen Freed uses the term, "Rock and Roll" for the first time
- 1955, Elvis Presley becomes first "Rock and Roll" star[3]

Using this non-traditional historical perspective, new "border years" emerge, yet each year reflects the traditional historical events of the period. For example the emergence of "Rock and Roll" as a movement in which traditional African American rhythm and blues music crossed over to white audiences coincides with the birth of the modern civil rights movement in the mid 1950s.

Non-traditional historical perspectives are not new. Indeed, "History of …" books have been popular for years. Another useful example would be Tom Standage's *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*.[4] In this engaging study, Standage, a technology editor for *The Economist*, divides world history into six distinct (non-traditional) historical eras based on the popular beverage of the time:

- Beer, ca. 6000 years ago
- Wine, Classical age of Greece and Rome
- Spirits, 15th-17th Centuries (Age of Exploration)
- Coffee, 18th Century (Age of Reason)

- Tea, 19th Century (Industrialization and Imperialism)
- Coca Cola, 20th Century to the Present

Again, we see that unique eras emerge that nonetheless reflect the major events of each time period. Such examinations afford a unique opportunity to examine traditional historical eras through an alternate perspective. Yet scholarly treatment of such perspectives is rare within the secondary classroom.

A New Perspective: Student Research

In attempting to engage their students, history educators are faced with the unenviable task of making topics such as economic systems, presidential policy, and U.S. foreign relations not only interesting, but relevant to teenagers who often find these topics dry and disconnected from the reality in which they exist. Therefore, the use of student driven, non-traditional historical perspectives is warranted to "hook" apathetic students.

At the beginning of every semester, I require my students to create a list of topics or hobbies that interest them. I collect the lists and classify the topics into broader categories. For example, I place video games into the category of media or technology. I then compile and distribute this category list to the class. A typical class list usually looks something like this:

- Music
- Literature
- Media
- Fashion
- Food
- Communication
- Race
- Religion
- Science
- Industry
- Transportation
- Presidents
- Aviation
- Labor
- Social Welfare
- Criminal Justice

Each student is then required to choose a non-traditional perspective that interests them. This is to be the alternative lens through which that student will view history *in addition* to the traditional perspectives I will present throughout the semester. For each unit of study, students are required to conduct independent research on the important events or trends of their chosen perspective during that time period. An annotated timeline and one-page written description compiled using both primary and secondary sources (both visual and textual) for each unit is required.

A New Perspective: Assessment

At the conclusion of the semester, students must compile their data in

two ways. First, a written research paper that includes the use of both primary and secondary sources complete with works cited detailing the development of their non-traditional theme in American history during the twentieth century. This is an amalgamation of the one-page written descriptions students completed at the end of each unit, edited and revised. Each paper must contain the following:

- Description of the non-traditional eras that emerged during the research of their chosen perspective
- Identification of "border years" that define these eras, and justification for each
- Analysis of the connection between the historical events of traditional eras (socio-cultural, economic, and political) and the events that define their non-traditional eras
- Discussion and analysis of at least one "mega year" that appears in one of their non-traditional eras
- At least one primary source visual
- Works cited page

Students are then required to create a multimedia presentation of their research. This can take the form of a video or PowerPoint presentation. Each presentation must contain the following:

- Complete annotated timeline of the ten most important events that are specific to their perspective (each event representing a "border year")
- At least one event on the timeline which occurs during a "mega-year"
- Primary source audiovisuals for each event on the timeline
- Discussion points for at least five events on the timeline:
  - Discussion points briefly address the major *traditional* historical events (socio-cultural, economic, and political) that correspond to each event on the timeline

For the multimedia presentation research, my students use the Media-Matrix tool available through Michigan State University at <http://matrix. msu.edu/~mmatrix/>. MediaMatrix is an online application that allows users to isolate, segment, and annotate digital media. This tool also contains a presentation generator that can be used in lieu of PowerPoint if the teacher prefers.

A New Perspective: Student Sample

The first semester I attempted this approach, I had mixed success due to obstacles that I will discuss later. However, several students that normally would not have been engaged in my classroom due to the subject matter (according to them) submitted exemplary assessments. One student in particular who described himself as "a math and science guy" reported

that this approach to history "kept him interested and awake" and provided him motivation to "sit through the other stuff so I can research what I am interested in." This student chose aviation as his alternate historical perspective, and the first six events on his timeline appeared as follows:

- 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright conduct first flight
    - Primary source audiovisual: audio of the Wright engine
- 1917, ("mega-year") U.S. aviation in WWI
    - Primary source audiovisual: photograph of Rickenbacker's Nieuport 28
    - political discussion point: U.S. foreign policy
- 1927, Lindbergh completes first solo trans-Atlantic flight
    - Primary source audiovisual: audio of Lindbergh's landing in Paris
- 1933, Birth of commercial aviation
    - Primary source audiovisual: photograph of Boeing 247 passenger plane
    - economic discussion point: commerce and transportation
- 1937, Amelia Earhart disappears and Hindenburg explodes in Lakehurst, New Jersey
    - Primary source audiovisuals: photograph of Earhart's plane and audio of Hindenburg explosion
    - socio-cultural discussion point: women's rights
    - economic discussion point: transportation and commerce
- 1945, ("mega year") World War II Aviation
    - Primary source audiovisuals: video of Enola Gay flight and photograph of Tuskegee Airmen
    - Political discussion point: U.S. foreign policy
    - Socio-cultural discussion point: civil rights

The timeline continued, marking aviation events up until September 11, 2001, and the use of commercial aircraft as weapons in the terror attacks on Washington D.C. and New York City. This student chose a subject matter that was not addressed in depth in his history book and studied all of the events in the standard curriculum through the lens of aviation. His engagement was high each day and his paper showed a level of discourse and analysis that revealed his understanding of the relevance and importance of past events related to both his specific interests and the required curriculum.

A New Perspective: Results and Obstacles

Obviously, the results of this approach were positive for the student cited above. However, it must be noted that this experiment did not eliminate all vestiges of apathy within my classroom. Rather, a select number of students who normally would not find history interesting or who would

typically disengage from classroom activities became more active, more attentive to lectures, and more motivated to complete assignments and perform better on assessments. There remained a smaller minority of students who simply refused "buy in" to this approach or any other that was attempted.

Yet those students that did adopt the new approach, while not a majority, achieved a level of success that should not be undervalued. Their increased engagement in the course improved the overall learning environment of the entire class. This also had the effect of isolating and identifying those students that were not succeeding because of academic and social challenges rather than factors related solely to motivation. In turn, it was easier for me to provide academic interventions for these students in a more efficient and timely manner.

During final presentations, all students were again exposed to the mandated curriculum in addition to several new historical perspectives from their peers. This approach allowed for the meeting of diverse learning styles and had the added effect of presenting a much more diverse view of past events. Recent research in the area of adolescent brain development suggests the benefit of individualized research. "If a teen is doing music or sports or academics, those are the cells and connections that will be hard-wired. If they're lying on the couch or playing video games or watching MTV, those are the cells and connections that are going to survive."[5]

In order for this approach to be implemented, a number of obstacles must be breached. First, a sufficient number of alternative perspectives must be generated. Every attempt should be made to assure that each student chooses a different perspective. If this is not possible and more than one student chooses the same perspective, careful monitoring and guidance must be in place to assure that each student's research and assessment is personalized, unique, and authentic.

Unfortunately, this approach takes a considerable amount of time in order to be implemented successfully. I found that at least one day of research in the computer lab for each unit was essential. Assigning the research as independent homework produced sporadic positive results at best the first time I attempted this approach. Also, several days must be set aside at the end of the semester for presentations of the cumulative assessment. If this time is not available, the teacher can evaluate the presentations personally, but this eliminates the most beneficial aspect of the presentations, in that every student is exposed to several different non-traditional historical perspectives and repeated discussion and analysis of traditional perspectives.

Thematic approaches to the teaching of history are nothing new. However this individualized approach goes well beyond the standard themes of

political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual based models. With attentive planning and implementation, it may just convert some of your students into history buffs.

Notes

1.   Meagan Hall and Georgia Brier, "From Frustrating Forgetfulness to Fabulous Forethought," *Science Teacher* 74, no. 1 (January 2007): 24-27.

2.   Barrington Boardman, *Flappers, Bootleggers,"Typhoid Mary" and the Bomb: An Anecdotal History of the U.S. from 1923-1945* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 103.

3.   David Johnson, "American Music Timeline," *Infoplease*, 17 April 2008, <http:// www.infoplease.com/spot/musictime4.html>.

4.   Tom Standage, *A History of the World in 6 Glasses* (New York: Walker and Company, 2005).

5.   Jamie Jones, "Teens Will Be Teens," *School Library Journal* 51, no. 1 (January 2005).