

Spotlight Article:

A Case for “Big Picture” History

As a child I was surrounded by adults who loved history. The stories told to me by my grandparents and parents made me feel connected to the past. For me, history wasn't a class you took in school—it was life itself. It came as no surprise that I grew up to be a historian and teacher.

Like many teachers who have taken their love of history to the classroom, I discovered that most students failed to share my joy of learning about the past. If asked to describe history, most students would exclaim “boring.” If pressed to elaborate, they would likely respond with their own question: “Why do we need to learn this anyway?” Their most immediate concern was if they were going to be tested on this material.

I spent a long time pondering why students view history as a useless subject. I realized that to most students, history is a series of isolated “facts” grouped in something called a chapter. You finish the chapter and take a test. You then move on to another chapter and another test. The chapters are grouped into units and, of course, there is a test at the end of each unit. To students, the school year goes by in a blur of meaningless dates, events, and dead people.

Remember the adage about not being able to see the forest for the trees? Missing from history is not the specifics but a coherent overview. I came to believe that the primary role of a history teacher is to help students learn how to make sense of all the isolated data to which they are exposed: in essence, show them how to connect the dots so they can see the “big picture.”

One way to do this is through the use of material culture, the study of a society through its tools, clothing, games, music, and everything else that it produces. It allows students to compare what they know (their world) with that which they don't know (the past). Here is an example of how it can work. All you need is a replica of a two-sided comb available through Internet reenactor supply sites.

The comb is made out of horn. Why horn? The answer is that horn was the plastic of the period. When hollowed and plugged, a cow horn became the perfect waterproof container for gun powder. Horns from cattle could be carved or molded into various shapes, like a comb.

Why does the horn have two sides? Notice that one side has course teeth and the other has fine teeth. The first is for combing hair—the second is for combing lice out of hair! The existence for this type of comb says something about early 19th century Americans. Lice were a problem with which these people had to contend.

Why were lice so common? Bathing without plumbing was a difficult chore. So was doing laundry. Washing one's body or clothes was not a priority in cold weather. Drying wet wool, one of the most common fabrics of the day, could take days. Then a miracle cloth appeared—cotton.

Why was cotton a miracle cloth? It was cool, colorful, comfortable, and could be washed and dried much easier than wool. More frequent washing meant a reduction in the conditions that produced lice. In addition to becoming more fashion forward, people began to get a little healthier as well.

But there was a negative side to this development. The large scale planting of cotton wore out the soil, creating a demand for new land. Thus, a constant push westward marks the early days of the republic. Moreover, a labor force was needed to cultivate this new miracle cloth, perpetuating the institution of slavery. Although Northerners rejected slavery, they nevertheless benefited from the development of textile factories throughout New England as a new industrial age emerged.

The evolution of two distinct economic systems in the North and the South, as exemplified by slavery, contributed to the almost inevitable rush towards civil war.

This short but broad overview started small (the louse) and ends big with a national tragedy. It reinforces the concept of cause and effect, something that hopefully translates to their own lives. Moreover, it enables students to develop a rationale for historic events that elevates this newly acquired knowledge from meaningless to meaningful. It adds two factors that are so often missing from classroom history—context and relevance.

The challenge facing teachers is to break free of textbooks and mandated guidelines that present students with a streamlined chronology of unconnected facts. Present history as the grand tale of humanity in which the past, present, and future are interwoven. Tell a story in which something as insignificant as an insect holds the key to understanding big events.

A former Social Studies teacher, Richard Bruce Winders earned his Ph.D. in History from Texas Christian University in 1994. He is the author of several books on southwestern history, including Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Establishment in the Mexican War, Crisis in the Southwest: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle for Texas, and Sacrificed at the Alamo: Tragedy and Triumph in the Texas Revolution. He has served as an advisor on documentaries and has appeared on the History Channel. Dr. Winders has held the position of Historian & Curator at the Alamo since 1996.