

AMERICAN HISTORY ALIVE!

A Baker's Dozen of Creative Teaching Approaches

By Richard C. Osborn

American history can and should be the most exciting class in the junior or senior academy. Unfortunately, many polls indicate that history is the class most hated by students at all levels. A change in teaching techniques could make this class as exciting to students as it is to most history teachers.

Too many teachers had as their mentors scholarly lecturers who imparted volumes of information that students had to copy down and reproduce on tests. Students were required to learn reams of facts, including trivial dates and names that had little relation to their lives. When these history majors became teachers themselves they inflicted the same methods on their junior and senior academy students.

Worse yet, elementary education majors who were forced to endure boring college history classes often became so turned off that they subsequently taught as little social studies as possible and conveyed their distaste for the subject to the younger generation.

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How can we reverse this downward spiral? The following guidelines offer some ideas to bring American history alive:

1. *History class should create memories.* Students should always be kept guessing about what will happen in class. The usual lecture method is useful, especially if it includes instructions on how to take notes. However, the class should be full of surprises in order

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to keep the students always anticipating the next class period.

2. *Teachers should utilize a variety of methods.* Too many history teachers have relied entirely on lectures, note-taking, research papers, and objective tests. Using a broader variety of techniques can help maintain a high student interest level.

3. *History class should include both content and skills.* For many years, teachers stressed only content—facts, dates, and names. More re-

cently, skills have been emphasized at the neglect of content. This has led conservatives in the Reagan Administration such as Lynne Cheney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, to warn that “so much emphasis has been placed on process that content has been seriously neglected.”¹ In correcting this deficiency we must be careful not to return to methods that have made students hate the subject so much.

In history, content and skills complement each other. However, the skills students learn in a history class stay with them much longer than the voluminous lists of dates, names, and places. These skills also have transfer value to other areas of life. In learning skills, students should go beyond rote memorization to higher skills such as comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This will help students achieve the Adventist ideal of being “thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought.”²

Students should not be required to learn more than 30 or 40 dates a year. However, those dates should be emphasized constantly throughout the entire year since they will provide an important chronology that will help students understand where they fit in their country’s heritage.

Too many students memorize long lists of historical facts for a test, but retain little of the information. However, if dates are reemphasized throughout the course, they can provide the basic building blocks for the constructing a meaning-

ful approach to history.

4. *History classes should help students discover unique perspectives on Adventism.* Historical issues and pioneers in Adventism offer perspectives that will give students new insights into their personal

and religious heritage.

5. *History classes should be both difficult and fun.* The more enjoyable the students find the class, the greater chance they will enjoy reading historical works the rest of their lives. Few of our students will

or should become history majors in college, but all of them should find that history is one of the most useful subjects they can study.

6. *History class should be practical.* Students should be able to find answers to some of the big questions they face in life as they study their country's history. When coupled with content and skills, the background and perspectives gained from American history can help students see immediate value in the class. Hopefully they will thereby become lifelong history lovers.

As an outgrowth of these premises the following methods were used in teaching American history classes at two Takoma Park, Maryland, schools in the 1970s.³

1. *Music.* One program used music and slides illustrating different views of America including such groups as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir; Peter, Paul, and Mary; Jay and the Americans; Simon and Garfunkel, and the Robert Shaw Chorale. Students were asked to pick a song that best described their views about the United States and one that was most different from their opinion. They were then asked to write a one-page essay explaining their choices.

Similar approaches can be used with music about the Civil War, Roaring Twenties, the Depression, or World War II. To earn extra credit, students may put together similar programs for the class.

2. *Declaration of Independence.* Students can type the first few lines in petition form and ask people to sign the document. Since most Americans do not recognize the Declaration, the very revolutionary character of the language becomes evident. Another activity involves students' writing a modern translation of the Declaration of Independence using similar techniques to those employed in producing a modern version of the Bible.

3. *Oral history.* Students can be asked to interview older Americans and then present a written or oral report on their conversations. It is not necessary for the teacher to emphasize the formal methodologies of oral history, just to give students the basic structure of an interview and a few suggested

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questions such as these:

a. Certain events in American history are so pivotal that people can tell you exactly what they were doing when they first heard the news. What were you doing when you heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed? Where were you when you heard that (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King) was assassinated? When the Challenger exploded?

b. Interview your grandparents about conditions during the Depression or World War II.

c. Find a soldier who served in Vietnam is willing to talk about the experience.

4. *Polling.* Work with students to develop questions for polling. Have them dial at random any seven numbers. When someone answers the phone, the student says, "Hello, I'm _____, an eight-grade student at _____ Adventist School in _____. We are conducting a poll for our American history class on how people plan to vote in the upcoming election. Would you be willing to participate?" The success rate on this kind of polling has been extremely high, with more than 95 percent responding. In class the next day, the students compile the results.

5. *Primary sources.* Original documents enable students to find out how historians work, but they also

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EXAMPLES OF INFLUENCES OF VALUES ON HISTORICAL EVENTS DURING 1700s

VALUE	PERSONS	TIME	ACTIONS	EFFECT
1. Decline of religion	English evangelists: John & Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, etc.	Climaxed 1740s	A. Prosperity B. Religious intolerance C. Spirit of Deism & enlightenment D. Decline of religion	A. Concern for material things B. Reaction against all religion C. Stressed rationalism & skepticism D. Revival movement—The Great Awakening
2. Inventiveness of the Enlightenment	Benjamin Franklin	1768	Leading scientist & foremost inventor of his time	Prime founder of the American Philosophical Society
3. Desire for freedom	Colonists	April 19, 1775 May 1775 July 4, 1776	Lexington & Concord Second Continental Congress Declaration of Independence	Minutemen & royal troops fought Continental Army established
4. Belief in both strong state and national government	Writers of Articles of Confederation Writers of Constitution	1776-1781 1788-1789	Wrote a national constitution	Developing conflict over the division of powers between individual states and the central government

day hold in common? What choices did they make based upon these values? These questions could lead to a discussion about the westward move of the populace and the spread of democracy.

The events of Abraham Lincoln's era offer insights into why the nation chose a strong central government, how a democracy came to be involved in a civil war, and why slavery was abolished.

Events of Woodrow Wilson's era show that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the welfare of the common man was willing to fight for justice throughout the world and lead nations into peace.¹¹

This does not imply that only one set of values shaped a particular era or group of people. In teaching American history, the values of many groups of people need to be examined. These include people as diverse as the adventurous explorers, profit-seeking merchants, oppressed minorities, persecuted religious groups, immigrants from various backgrounds, and those who found expression in a common culture.

American history is the story of a nation's development from a small group of squabbling colonies to a strong, united world power. The story encompasses the country's failures as well as its successes.

In planning the social studies curriculum, teachers need to evaluate every area of history from the perspective of the cause-and-effect relationships that grow out of a country's value system.

The accompanying charts use some examples from American history to illustrate how events in a particular era related to the American value system at that time. The chart can be expanded or revised to include material appropriate to any social studies class in any country.¹²

In Conclusion

The social studies curriculum should integrate the history, geography, and values of people who lived at different times and in different places on our earth. This will help students develop a sense of where they fit—both historically and geographically. It will also teach them to live as citizens of both a local and a global community as they prepare to take their place in God's eternal kingdom. □

REFERENCES

- ¹ William J. Bennett, "First Lessons," *Phi Delta Kappan* (October 1986), p. 127.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch, "Survey Results: U.S. 17-Year-Olds Know Shockingly Little About History and Literature," *The American School Board Journal*, 174:10 (October 1987), p. 31.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Bennett, p. 126.
- ⁶ Diane Ravitch, "Tot Sociology," *American Scholar*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer 1987, pp. 343-354.
- ⁷ Bennett, p. 127.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Quoted by Bennett, p. 128.
- ¹⁰ "Values, Pluralism, and Public Education," a speech by John H. Buchanan, Chairman, People for the American Way, April 3, 1987, at a conference in Washington, D.C.
- ¹¹ Corinne Forsee, *U.S. History Can Be Fun* (Portland, Me.: 1956), pp. 3-5. (Reprinted from Allan Nevins' forward to *America, Land of Freedom*, textbook published by D. C. Heath and Co.)
- ¹² Idea of charts developed by Judy Ronk. Information on charts drawn from Harvard Sitkoff, *American History to 1865* (New York: Monarch Press, Inc., 1965).

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offer fascinating insights into historical events. Conflicts between sources can be used as a basis for developing higher-level thinking skills. Here are some examples:

a. The differing accounts by Americans and British of such events as the Boston Tea Party, the Boston "Massacre," and the first shots in the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord can be used in many ways.

The key to effective research to require students to give a *creative* presentation, not simply read the reports verbatim. Students can prepare radio or television reports summarizing the varied perspectives, or compile newspaper stories that attempt to distinguish fact from opinion. Students can examine a variety of textbooks to discover which views were accepted by the authors.

b. Students can research varying accounts of the reasons why certain colonists emigrated to America. They can then participate in role-playing exercises such as these: (1) You are a Pilgrim leader trying to convince a group of your followers to migrate to America. (2) A Puritan meets a Scotch-Irishman on the street where they compare reasons for coming to America. (3) A Quaker discusses with a group of Indians his need for land in America. (4) A slave in the solitude of her lowly shack on a plantation expresses her thoughts about America.

c. Have students read various primary sources dealing with different perspectives dealing with slavery in Antebellum times. Then have them role-play what they have read. For example, a freed slave tells what slavery was like and compares it to his life now. An abolitionist talks to a group in the North. A traveler from France gives her impressions of a visit to the South.

d. Ask students to share the perspectives of Woodrow Wilson, William Borah, and

Henry Cabot Lodge on the League of Nations. One way to do this is to stage a press conference, with students taking the role of each man.

7. *Nation of immigrants.* Post a world map on the wall. Have students find out which countries are part of their background on both sides of the family. Have them ask the same question of at least four of their neighbors. Pin a dot on the map for each country represented in the project. Then have the students compare the class distribution to actual immigration statistics.

8. *Family histories.* Students learn a lot from preparing their own family tree and writing a brief family history, which they share with the class.

9. *Current events.* Frequently teachers will devote one day a week to current events. These sessions can be made livelier if students make creative presentations on events in the news. They can produce radio or television shows, original or taped music, plays, and skits; slide shows, student newspapers, quiz shows, or student-drawn cartoons.

10. *Ancient maps.* What the explorers knew about the location and geography of America can best be illustrated by use of ancient maps by Toscanelli, Johann Ruysch, Johannes de Stobnicza, Orontius Finaeus, and Sir Humphrey Gilbert.

As students compare the dates of these maps with various explorations, they will clearly see how increased knowledge about the earth's continents developed. The impact of the Bible on the ideas of many explorers can also be studied by using Psalm 19:4; 72:18; Ezekiel 26:18; Zachariah 9:10; and Esdras 6:42 (from the Apocrypha).

11. *Practical issues.* A series of practical outgrowths of material in American history could include the following:

a. When studying about joint stock companies' involvement in colonizing America, students can compare the New York Stock Exchange to earlier methods of issuing stock. Give them an imaginary \$1,000 to invest in the stock market and ask them to keep track of its progress through the semester.

b. When studying about foreign affairs, focus on the alternatives a young person

faces in regard to the military draft. Present articles from several perspectives and then have each student formulate a personal position for a class presentation or debate.

c. When studying the American economy students can investigate the issue of how an Adventist should relate to labor unions.

d. When studying World War II, students will obtain a startling example of giving in to earthly powers by studying Adventists' attitudes toward Hitler and the Nazis. Students should consider whether they would have acted any differently. How about peer pressure today?

12. *The Adventist perspective.* American history can be studied through the eyes of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This will give students an important perspective on their faith.

a. Joseph Bates was impressed into the British navy during the War of 1812 and spent time in British prisoner camps. His *Autobiography* represents a fascinating primary source for one of the major causes of the war.

b. Many sources about the Civil War offer

the content, skills, and attitudes will remain with students for years. Students I taught 18 years ago in eighth grade still recall the simulation game used in their class—"1787. A Simulation Game" by Eric Rothschild and Werner Feig.

This game recreates the U.S. Constitutional Convention. First, the class spends at least two class periods studying parliamentary procedure, a skill the students will use the rest of their lives. During the actual convention, they are required to practice these procedures.

Four students are elected to various positions—George Washington; James Madison, who takes the official minutes; Benjamin Franklin, who serves as mediator; and Thomas Grant, a journalist who must post a daily newspaper detailing events of the previous day.

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varying viewpoints on specific battles and slavery. Have students compare statements about the war by Ellen G. White and other early Adventists.

c. The rise of the reform movement in American history provided a key background in the development of the Adventist Church. Ellen White's comments offer an Adventist perspective on the reform movements being studied.

d. Adventist publishing houses have printed many books that offer excellent outside reading for history classes. A few also offer insight into historical events as seen by an Adventist.⁴

e. The role of the United States in prophecy can provide an interesting background to the class. Artists' conceptions of the animals in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation can enhance interest in this topic.⁵

13. *Simulation games.* The newspaper headlines on the classroom bulletin board tell it all: "Butler Threat to Leave Union Flops"; "Slap-Happy Chris, and His Hot Air Balloon Vote!" and "Southerners Pull Out."

One of the best ways to create memories is using an extended simulation game in which students participate daily for several weeks. Although these games take time,

The other students are randomly assigned the role of a delegate representing four different interest groups. They are either from a large or small state, for a strong or weak government, from the North or South, and have landed or liquid capital. The same individuals do not necessarily have the same four interests, which means that alliances are constantly changing, depending on the issue. The teacher lectures on the background of the convention, focusing on the Articles of Confederation with their strengths and weaknesses.

Without doing any further research on the period, students take the assigned interests and work to write a new constitution for the country. The written agenda with various options basically goes through the Constitution. Roll call votes are taken on most issues so that each individual feels as though he or she is participating. Students are forced to defend their votes according to the interest they represent.

If this activity continues for at

least two weeks, each student becomes personally involved in the convention. Emotions can run high with walkouts even taking place. Students learn that they can argue with one another and still be friends, even if this is sometimes difficult.

At the completion of the game, the class has written a constitution for the United States. The teacher then goes through the student constitution article by article, comparing it with the actual Constitution. I have been amazed to hear the students using the same arguments and methods to get their way as were used by the founders of America.

Civil War Simulation Game

At the academy level, I used a Civil War simulation game in which each student represents a state governor at an imaginary convention a few years before the war broke out. The convention deals with each of the major issues confronting the country and the steps leading up to the war. As each step is completed, the teacher lectures the students on what actually happened.⁶

Can we make American history come alive? The above suggestions can help make the subject a fascinating exploration of the story of our country and church, and offer dividends in critical thinking skills and research techniques. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Lynne Cheney, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1987).

² Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), pp. 17, 18.

³ The techniques were used in eighth-grade social studies at John Nevins Andrews School, and in American history at Takoma Academy.

⁴ Recommended books include Ron Graybill's *Mission to Black America*, Maria Anne Hirschmann's *I Changed Gods*, and Jan Doward's *The Seventh Escape*. A highly recommended journal, now in its 11th year of publication, *Adventist Heritage: A Journal of Adventist History*, is produced by the Department of Archives and Special Collections with the Department of History and the Division of Religion, Loma Linda University, Riverside, CA 92515-8427. Styled after *American Heritage*, this journal provides articles full of pictures and illustrations that can be helpful in the classroom.

⁵ Because of the danger of pointing to specific events as a fulfillment of prophecy, it is better to provide a general theological framework for interpreting recent happenings.

⁶ Teachers in other countries can adapt the above ideas to suit the historical and political events in their own lands.

"HANDS-ON" SOCIAL STUDIES

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making business, and that I don't know any other trade. Without my shop we would not have food on the table or a roof over our heads. Furthermore, to demonstrate our loyalty I've invited two British soldiers to board in our home."

Dela, choosing her words carefully, said....

Debriefing questions: What options does Dela have, and what are the consequences of each? What could happen to Ethan's business when friends and acquaintances find out about his decision? What if he changes his mind and supports the patriots?

Simulation Games

Students can participate in a variety of experiences through simulation games. Such games provide numerous opportunities for decision-making, problem solving, and conflict resolution. The following game is an example:

Briefing questions: How do you feel when you are unable to express your ideas or opinions?

How do you think the colonists felt when they were unable to vote on laws that affected their lives?

Read the following scenario and decide which of the laws or acts passed by the English Parliament would negatively affect the greatest number of colonists.

Scenario: It is 1766. You and several colonists in Boston have decided to form a committee and travel to England. The purpose of the trip is to speak with King George III and members of the English Parliament about the increased tensions and even open hostility toward English rule in the colonies. Your committee has decided on a moderate approach when they meet with the king. Rather than protest all the laws imposed by England on the colonies, the committee will select and present a protest regarding only two laws that have the most negative effects on the largest number of colonists. Which two of the following will your committee select?

Write a list of reasons why each law needs to be repealed. Also include a list of reasons that the king might have for keeping the laws.

Laws and Acts:

1. *Proclamation of 1763* ordered American colonists to stay east of the Allegheny Mountains. Colonists could not go west to establish settlements. The law was intended to prevent further Indian raids against British forts.

2. *Navigation Acts* declared that trade with the colonists had to be carried out by ships

owned, built, and manned by Englishmen and certain products, called enumerated articles (sugar, tobacco, cotton, wool, indigo, rice, and others) could be sold only to England and not traded with any other country.

3. *Quartering Act of 1764* stated that the colonists must furnish food and living quarters for British troops stationed in the colonies.

4. *Stamp Act of 1765* stated that the colonists must pay a special tax on all legal documents, newspapers, pamphlets, and all other printed matter used in the colonies.

Group-Based Activities

The following two activities can be used with all students as introductory, diagnostic, or review activities.

Seek, Find, and Sign¹

Directions: SEEK people who can answer the following questions. When you FIND someone who knows the answer to a question, ask that person to SIGN his or her name on the line beside the question.

- ___ 1. Knows someone who buys merchandise from other countries.
- ... 2. Has a family member who has served in the United States Army, Navy, or Air Force.
- ___ 3. Knows where a famous tea party took place.
- ... 4. Knows what happened to Crispus Attucks.
- ___ 5. Can describe what Minutemen were.
- ___ 6. Knows someone who has protested against unfair treatment.
- ___ 7. Has a family member who lives west of the Allegheny Mountains.
- ___ 8. Can list three items that were taxed as a result of the Stamp Act.
- ___ 9. Can explain the Quartering Act of 1764.
-10. Can tell why British soldiers were called Lobster Backs.
- ___11. Can explain how Paul Revere became famous.
- ___12. Has traveled across a large body of water in a boat.
- ___13. Can describe the type of transportation that was affected by the Navigation Acts.
- ___14. Can define *continental*.

Colonial Mystery²

The purpose of this activity is to identify the mystery event including the date, the place, and the primary characters.

Directions: The teacher should make approximately 15 clue cards. Some of the cards should be irrelevant. (See samples below.) Randomly distribute cards to students, who take turns reading their cards