

Research Brief

Teaching American History

Question: What constitutes best practices for teaching American History?

Summary of Findings: Best practice in teaching American History is a two-pronged approach: a high quality curriculum with highly engaging instruction. Muir (2001-www.mcmel.org) showed that good learning experiences: create strong relationships; involve hands-on, active work; adjust for differences in learning styles; make learning interesting; allow students choices; make connections to previous knowledge, the students lives, and the real world; and put learning into context. The National Standards for History describe the kinds of content, activities, and historical thinking students should be involved. Students engaged in standards-based work will draw upon skills in the following five interconnected dimensions of historical thinking:

1. Chronological Thinking
2. Historical Comprehension
3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
4. Historical Research Capabilities
5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-making

According to the National Standards for History:

The study of history rests on knowledge of facts, dates, names, places, events, and ideas. In addition, true historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal solid evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in their textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves; to consult documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, works of art, quantitative data, and other evidence from the past, and to do so imaginatively—taking into account the historical context in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time.

Real historical understanding requires that students have opportunity to create historical narratives and arguments of their own. Such narratives and arguments may take many forms—essays, debates, and editorials, for instance. They can be initiated in a variety of ways. None, however, more powerfully initiates historical thinking than those issues, past and present, that challenge students to enter knowledgeably into the historical record and to bring sound historical perspectives to bear in the analysis of a problem.

Historical understanding also requires that students thoughtfully read the historical narratives created by others. Well-written historical narratives are interpretative, revealing and explaining connections, change, and consequences. They are also analytical, combining lively storytelling and biography with conceptual analysis drawn from all relevant disciplines. Such narratives promote essential skills in historical thinking.

Online Resources:

National Standards for History

Describes the kinds of content, activities, and historical thinking that students and teachers do together in high quality History classrooms.

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/>

Countdown To Millennium: An Oral History Collection Project

This study guide has several sections. The first two pages, What Is Oral History? and Why Use Oral History?, give a background to the methodology of oral narratives and why they are important. There are examples from oral histories to illustrate the points made. They're a good background for teachers and students alike. Additional pages talk about how you can create an archive of local stories in the classroom.

<http://www.tcomschool.ohiou.edu/cdtm/>

Foxfire

Best known for its “cultural journalism” approach, Foxfire (The Foxfire Fund, Inc.) is a not-for-profit, educational, and literary organization based in Rabun County, Georgia. Students interview community elders and write about vanishing arts, crafts, and skills, historical buildings and sites, and interesting community members. Foxfire's learner-centered, community-based educational approach is advocated through both a regional demonstration site grounded in the Southern Appalachian culture that gave rise to Foxfire and a national program of teacher training and support that promotes a sense of place and appreciation of local people, community, and culture as essential educational tools.

<http://www.foxfire.org/>

Teaching with Historic Places

Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) uses properties listed in the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places to enliven history, social studies, geography, civics, and other subjects. TwHP has created a variety of products and activities that help teachers bring historic places into the classroom.

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/>

Teaching with Historic Places. ERIC Digest.

Our communities are classrooms waiting to be explored; they offer places that are continually shaped and reshaped by our historical experiences and cultural expressions. Some of these places document dramatic events, heroic deeds, creative and technical inventiveness, and the lives of extraordinary men and women. Others reflect the everyday events and patterns of ordinary people over time. Both types of places--the extraordinary and the ordinary--become a part of our local, state, and national heritage.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1994/places.htm>

National History Day

National History Day is not just one day, but a yearlong education program that makes history come alive through educator professional development and active student learning.

<http://www.nationalhistoryday.org/>

Local Historical Archives Project

TIELab's Local Historical Archives Project brings valuable historical records -- from maps and official documents to journals and photographs -- off of dusty shelves and into the classroom. It involves students directly -- as photographers, scanners and apprentice historians -- in the creation of an online town historical archive that will grow into a curricular resource for local teachers. TIELab partners with schools, libraries and historical societies to create this archive whose principal purpose is to make learning about history more engaging to students.

<http://www.tielab.org/lhap/>

Teaching With Documents: Lesson Plans

This section contains reproducible copies of primary documents from the holdings of the National Archives of the United States, teaching activities correlated to the National History Standards and National Standards for Civics and Government, and cross-curricular connections.

http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/teaching_with_documents.html

Repositories of Primary Sources

A listing of over 5300 websites describing holdings of manuscripts, archives, rare books, historical photographs, and other primary sources for the research scholar

<http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>

Constructing An Online Museum

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

A model lesson for teaching history with technology by creating an online museum.

<http://www.caryacademy.org/historytech/Vol1no1/onlinemuseumpage1.htm>

Planning A Virtual Field Trip

A model lesson for teaching history with technology by creating a virtual field trip.

<http://www.caryacademy.org/historytech/Vol1no1/virtualfieldtripspage1.htm>

National Council for the Social Studies

Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to provide leadership, service, and support for all social studies educators.

<http://www.socialstudies.org>

The Society for History Education

<http://www.csulb.edu/~histeach/>

History Teacher.net

<http://www.historyteacher.net/>

Homework Help - U.S. History - Western Expansion - Railroads

<http://www.kcls.org/hh/rr.cfm>

RR History Links By State

<http://www.trainweb.org/wyomingrails/rhist.html>

Encyclopedia of Western Railroad History

<http://cpr.org/Museum/Encyclopedia.html>

List of Railroad Museums and Historical Sites

http://www.newportnet.com/yprhs/link_page.htm

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Submitted By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning



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