

A Class Kids Love to Hate



“Insanely tedious,” “boring as hell,” “stupid and worthless,” “the worst,” “watered down,” “too general.” What do all these descriptions have in common? They describe high-school history classes around the country. Perhaps such harsh words are hardly surprising, except that these come from kids who profess to like and enjoy studying history. For most high-school students, history is a lot like the multiplication tables: memorizing vast quantities of seemingly disconnected factoids—unrelieved drudgery except for the occasional, unpromised oasis of a dynamic teacher who asks for something more. As one of my friends from a New York private school put it, she would not have taken ninth-grade world history had it not been required because “it’s hard to keep track of all the events that happened worldwide over such a long period of time.”

When *Common-place* asked me to write for this column from the perspective of a high-school student, I started thinking about how my perception of history has been affected by how I’ve been taught. Since I’ve found the most satisfaction in doing primary research, I decided to begin there, with an informal survey. I emailed about thirty friends around the country: Alaska, California, Connecticut, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, and Virginia. They are all about seventeen to nineteen years old; from public and private high schools, urban, suburban, and small town; and headed for selective and very selective colleges. I asked them questions such as what they liked best and least about their history courses,

what would have improved the courses, and what role writing and research had.

I should confess that only a few short years ago, I too hated history—it had even less appeal than learning the multiplication tables because there is more of it. My informal poll revealed that I was not alone; none of my friends entered high school thinking they would ever like, much less love, a history course. While only a few are still vehement about it (“I hate history and wouldn’t take an AP [course] in it if a gun was put to my head”), even the ones who say history is their favorite subject can only cite one or two examples of “awesome” courses, even when they’ve exhausted their schools’ offerings in the social sciences.

Fortunately, high-school students only need an excellent class or two to be seduced by a subject. Like most of my very limited sample set, I was lucky enough to have teachers who use primary sources to provoke intellectual debate, who require written work that has students actually “do” history, who act as role-model historians, and who insist that framing good questions and identifying inconsistencies are more important than regurgitating a predetermined set of answers. They let us see that history is not about learning the past; it’s about constructing understandings of the past and gaining skills useful in the present.

Virtually every one of my correspondents mentioned the value of primary sources. I remember my first few assignments analyzing journals written by conquistadors and sixteenth-century mariners involved in the African slave trade. They were difficult to read and even harder to understand. Yet, with time and effort, they became easier to decipher and intellectually exciting. As a Colorado friend put it, the two sourcebooks (in addition to a textbook) assigned in his class gave him a “real feel for what life was like.” A Vermont student loves reading novels and speeches for his courses, analyzing both what the authors were trying to say and their motives for saying it. A New Hampshire student describes her favorite history courses as using “every resource imaginable to learn about history: textbooks, the Internet, autobiographies, biographies, documents, articles, and people.”

Most students recognize the value of having a textbook to provide an overview but see textbooks as boring, predigested, and avoiding all controversy. A Long Island friend commented that he “would have enjoyed reading other materials, particularly primary sources” beyond the textbook, while a Massachusetts student suggests that if he were going to teach a course, “First, I would focus on primary sources. They are short, and they get the point across . . . I would include multimedia (Websites, movies, documentaries and even music) wherever I could to keep things interesting.”

Richard Light, author of *Making the Most of College*, writes that students value class discussion that has “structured disagreement.” Primary sources are a superb tool for provoking debate because they are open to interpretation. For example, after reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, one of my friends described

a debate where half the class was assigned to argue that Joseph Conrad was a racist and the book projects his racism while the rest had to defend Conrad as exposing the glaring racism of his time. My friend "really enjoyed this exercise; it got everyone (passionately) involved, as well as brought in two perspectives for the novel." As one New York City student notes, "[T]wenty people would read the same document and get twenty different interpretations . . . it was inevitable that this difference of opinion would actually teach you something." Primary sources inspire discussion that increases understanding of the topic and gives practice building arguments, thereby helping participants grow as historians.

Teachers who require the use of primary sources to construct arguments are requiring their students to do what historians do. To those who object that holding students to such high standards for research papers will discourage students, my correspondents and Light's research show that the more substantive writing one does for a course (with frequent feedback), the more interesting the subject becomes. As Light argues, "The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students' level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students' level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students' engagement and any other course characteristic." Feedback does help. When Peter Sheehy, my sophomore-year American history teacher, gave me two pages of enthusiastic comments (typed, single-spaced) on a research paper, I couldn't help but take his comments as seriously as he took my paper.

It also helps when serious research efforts can be celebrated, or even published. William Fitzhugh's *The Concord Review*, a journal of high-school history writing, encourages students to be active historians the way science research allows them to be active scientists. Not only is it thrilling to be published; it's thrilling to think that history is something even a "beginner" can do.

The very best teachers model for their students how historians think and how history is written. My freshman-year history teacher, Elisabeth Sperling, led us to wonder about such cosmic questions as, Was the Aztec civilization doomed to fail? Much to our frustration, she never answered these questions; rather, she asked us what we would need to know to find the answers ourselves. We spent many class discussions learning how to think historically by breaking these cosmic questions into sets of smaller, more easily answerable ones, the answers to which would eventually lead us to a larger perspective on the topic at hand.

The next year, Sheehy had a very different approach. Every day he climbed five flights of stairs to our classroom, carrying his new G4 laptop and at least five books we hadn't seen before. In the fall he would sometimes open one or more of these books and discuss how the authors' views differed from our textbook and handouts. These were books he found interesting and he selected fascinating excerpts for us. Or he might open his laptop and rapidly surf to a

cool, new historical Website with tantalizing material. By the spring we were much better at taking positions that would trigger either his surfing or his reading passages in the books of the day. His excerpts were so well chosen that many students asked to borrow the books after he finished them. As more and more of these books were shared around the class and these Websites got bookmarked, our discussions became more intense and better supported, even continuing on the walk to our next classes. He taught us how to discern differences between historical arguments—and he made us care about how evidence is used.

Finally, during my senior year, my East Asian history teacher, Lawrence Weiss, told our class at the beginning of the year that we would not be learning even a small fraction of what there is to know about his enormous field. Instead, he wanted us to focus on causality and context, drawing parallels between historical social, political, and economic issues and modern ones that we might find interesting. He often came to class carrying that day's *New York Times*, prepared to help us understand some article on China, made relevant to our current lesson by his erudition. We watched *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and learned about hiding political messages in artistic stories, in this case, the May Fourth Movement. He modeled, on a daily basis, that historians can use many different cultural products as primary sources.

Insanely tedious? Stupid and worthless? It doesn't have to be. Those who say history is dull and useless either have not experienced history as an active endeavor or must not find any subject useful or interesting: anything interesting has a history. My friends who are aspiring engineers need to understand the history of technology because scientists constantly try to fix the irregularities of the past to edge progress forward. My friends who are artists cannot be original without having mastered their art's origins. Even historians acknowledge their predecessors in order to fit newly constructed perspectives into recognizable contexts. History boring? Hardly. But it can be very hard work.

Further Reading: See Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). I'd like to particularly thank the following people for their long and thoughtful responses, some of which ran five or more pages: Sarah Comeau, William Frank, Philip Johnson, Joanne King, Michael Pareles, William Ratkus, Thomas Rodrigues, David Rosenberg, Maxine Stachel, Adam Vidoni, and Shawna-Gay White.

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