



# History Lessons

The challenge of teaching history in volatile times

*Glenn Cook*



# D

Patrick Pyle's love of history and teaching becomes clear within five minutes of meeting him, but when the subject turns to education politics, the social studies director for the San Antonio Independent School District shows that he's mastered the Texas sidestep.

In early 2018, the Texas State Board of Education began discussions around ways to streamline the social studies curriculum. Teachers had complained that the state standards were so overstuffed with historic figures—fourth grade, for example, had more than 90 to choose from—that they had become a mosh pit. But the battle over which figures to leave out quickly turned political.

Recommendations to remove Moses, defenders of the Alamo, and the sources of conflict in the Middle East were denounced on one side. Meanwhile, others was incensed by recommendations to remove Hillary Clinton and Helen Keller from the list. After 10 months, none was removed.

"There are a lot of content standards, and not a lot of time to teach them, so it makes sense to reduce them a little bit and make them more manageable," says Pyle, who served on one of the streamlining committees. "At the same time, I understand where both sides are coming from. No one wants to lose someone who is important to them."

In a politically unsettled time nationally, history teachers are facing daunting barriers amid calls to change how students learn about the past. Critics say the "drill and kill" methods that focus on memorization of facts and people are not giving students what they need to be well-informed citizens. Meanwhile, in an accountability-focused era of "what gets tested gets funded and taught," history is trailing far behind English, math, and science.

"When you're looking at how we teach history, the true challenge is how to put together a course or a sequence of courses that have enough substance to allow you to wrestle with various topics," says Bruce Lesh, director of social studies, science, and disciplinary literacy for the Maryland State Department of Education. "The default mode is to make sure nothing is left out, so all the teacher does is mention a series of names and moves on to the next thing. That means you're not able to do anything that resonates with kids because you're just hitting the highlights."

There are some signs that history is due—if not overdue—for a comeback. More states are looking to create new standards for history and social studies that are centered on the Common Core and use document-based and project-based assessments. As technology becomes more



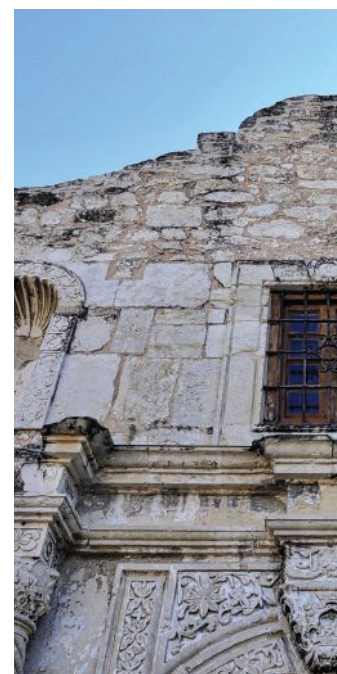


PHOTO CREDIT FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: KLIKK/STOCK.ADOBE.COM, ALEXEY ROTANOV/STOCK.ADOBE.COM, GLENN COOK, ATLANTIC\_ADVERT/STOCK.ADOBE.COM, SPIRITOFAMERICA/STOCK.ADOBE.

robust, schools are becoming less reliant on traditional textbooks. That puts less power in the hands of groups like the Texas State Board of Education, which held considerable sway over publishers because it educates almost 10 percent of the nation's K-12 students.

"We've put so much emphasis on STEM education that history has taken a backseat to STEM, and it has for more than a decade," says Cathy Gorn, executive director of National History Day, which engages more than 600,000 students annually in project-based learning. "No Child Left Behind left history and history education behind. Not that it was knocked out of schools completely, but it certainly was put on the back burner, and it shouldn't be. It's too important."

### NO 'SAGE ON THE STAGE'

In San Antonio, Pyle and his small staff of instructional coaches are working with teachers to "move away from the 'sage on the stage' model" and encouraging students to practice inquiry and analysis so they can draw their own conclusions. That, he says, is how history should be taught, not as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, when fact-based instruction focused on providing a "base of knowledge that everyone needed to be a citizen."

Texas requires students to pass the 11th grade government test in order to graduate, so meeting the state standards has to drive instruction, Pyle says. At the same time,

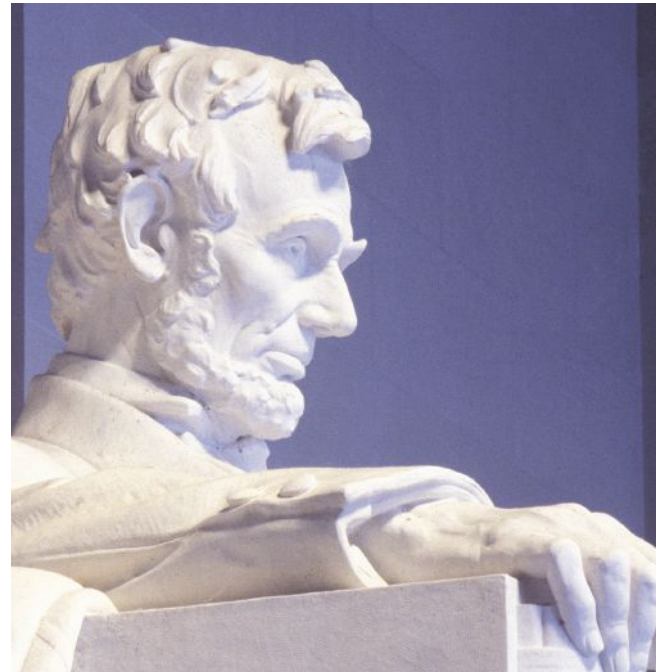
he's looking for teachers who can push students to think in "a bigger context" and be able to justify their positions.

"We are in a period where that body of knowledge may not be the most important thing to get out of a social studies or history class," he says. "We need to focus instead on thinking, analysis, problem solving, and communications skills, not necessarily learning this body of facts. It's a lot harder to do that, because effectively developing those skills in students is much more intellectually demanding"

Lesh says the "drill and kill" model, focusing on rote memorization of facts, still dominates history instruction nationally. He concedes professional development needs to improve to help "shift teachers' understanding of the discipline" and points to a method that has been successful in Maryland.

"When you are in math, you learn how to solve problems," he says. "No math teacher would ever conduct a class where you give them all the answers to the questions. What we're doing is helping history teachers to realize it's not necessary to give them the answers, but to give them the skills to find the answers, to learn how to aggregate information and build the answers so there's actual 'doing' to the process. Once they do this, they tend not to go back because they see how engaged the students are."

Sorting facts from rhetoric and helping students to seek out valid primary sources are critical skills, especially in the "fake news" era. But teachers have so much content to



get through before the end-of-grade testing that it becomes “harder and harder to take the time to do that,” Pyle says.

“It’s become more and more important, not just for students but for the general public, to verify information and the value of the source,” he says. “That skill is hard to begin with and hard to teach, and the quantity of information that is out there and available is mind-boggling.”

### TEACHING DIFFICULT TOPICS

In early December, Jeff Kash was teaching a unit on Thomas Jefferson and slavery to eighth-grade U.S. history students at James Madison Middle School in North Hollywood, California. The unit was designed to help students at the computer science and engineering design magnet school understand why the Founding Fathers kept slavery in the Constitution.

The students have a very hard time getting their heads around the very complicated issues surrounding Jefferson and slavery, let alone his relationship with Sally Hemmings,” Kash says, referencing the woman Jefferson enslaved and with whom he fathered five children.

Teaching Tolerance, a department of the Southern Poverty Law Center, issued a report in 2018 that found numerous problems with the quality of instruction around slavery. The report, “Teaching Hard History,” pointed to “the deep, abiding American need to conceive of and understand our history as ‘progress,’ as the story of a people

and a nation that always sought the improvement of mankind, the advancement of liberty and justice, the broadening of pursuits of happiness for all.”

Slavery “is something we deal with from the beginning of the year” in Kash’s class, which takes U.S. history through the Civil War. Threading the topic throughout the year, using primary and secondary sources, allows the students to process how history has shaped our nation’s policies and laws.

“I think history teachers are basically literacy teachers with a focus on history,” says Kash. “Having students learn to question, think, and write is far more important than ‘drill and kill.’ I still want my students to learn U.S. history, but they learn it now by reading primary and secondary sources and writing about it.”

Nate Sleeter, a former history teacher who now works as a digital teaching and learning specialist for the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, now helps develop online resources for TeachingHistory.org. He says one reason slavery has not been taught well is because it strays from the “checklist mentality” of many teachers.

“There’s no easy answer,” Sleeter says of the best way to teach slavery. “It’s always been difficult but it’s also incredibly necessary. You can’t understand U.S. history without understanding the role that slavery plays in it. That’s why it’s so important to bring in more groups and get the



*“We’re in this culture of extremism, and that makes teaching history difficult, because people are coming at it with preconceived notions and political and ideological extremism on either end of the spectrum.”*

— *Cathy Gorn, executive director of National History Day*

perspectives of a variety of underrepresented or historically marginalized citizens. It put things into context.”

Kash agrees, pointing to a lesson he teaches on Irish immigration in the 1800s in the U.S.

“The students read how the Irish were hated because they were poor and Catholic. It is pretty easy to draw a straight line to what is happening today with our immigration policy and what happened to the Irish,” he says. “It’s hard to ignore race relations when you discuss slavery, the abolition movement, and Reconstruction. These topics give us plenty of opportunities to examine how far we have come in terms of race relations and how far we need to go.”

### **HISTORY TALKS**

Since Pyle took over the social studies department, battles and rhetoric have been ongoing over the Trump administration’s proposal to build a wall separating the Texas-Mexico border. In a district in which more than 90 percent of students are Hispanic, Pyle admits discussions around immigration can be tough for teachers and students.

“The political environment is challenging,” he says. “When we do professional development, conversations spring up and we talk to teachers about how to handle those sensitivities and potential trauma with students, because it’s present. Teachers need to be mindful of that,

certainly, and I think they are.”

Gorn admits that teaching history “can be quite challenging” because some topics are so controversial. She says National History Day, which relies on primary sources, allows “history to talk to these kids itself.”

“We’re in this culture of extremism, and that makes teaching history difficult, because people are coming at it with preconceived notions and political and ideological extremism on either end of the spectrum,” she says. “What National History Day allows us to do is let history tell its story, then have the students interpret it and come up with their own conclusions. That’s the best way to approach these more difficult topics.”

Pyle says his goal is to create classrooms where students can “give you a valid justification for their conclusion about a topic that is evidence-based,” no matter what historic figure is being discussed.

“Think about it,” he says. “If you can get students to generate their own opinions that are informed by evidence, and then be able to communicate them in a respectful, appropriate manner in a variety of formats, that’s like ideal social studies and history in a nutshell.”

---

*Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com), a contributing editor to American School Board Journal, is a freelance writer and photographer in Northern Virginia.*