Foundations of a History Course

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract:

For incoming high school students, history education is commonly hindered by limiting misconceptions that skew the potential of such courses. Students routinely perceive a history course as a collection of dry facts and countless dates. If an instructor does not take the time to address these misconceptions, students enter the class without a fair appreciation for the value of a history course. This twenty-four minute film introduces students to the incredible potential of history education. By addressing such topics as historical perspectives, the connections between the past and the present, global interactions, history's relevancy to all career paths, and entertaining approaches to history, students obtain a well-rounded understanding for what a history course offers. Nine different history instructors, ranging from junior high and high school teachers to collegiate professors, reinforce the advantages of taking a history course. This film is grounded in the realization that history is first and foremost a story about people. Upon establishing this foundation, students become more aware of their personal connection with history. Designed to serve as an orientation video for students new to a high school history setting, Foundations of a History Course showcases how the principles of history education have a direct impact on students' everyday lives. In order to better distribute this film, it has been uploaded to the Internet at "foundationsofhistory.org."
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Author’s Statement

As a Social Studies Education Major, it was important to create a product that did more than demonstrate my understanding of core concepts. I wanted to develop a project that could actually be utilized in my own and others’ classrooms. It was with this goal in mind that led to the collaborating effort with my partner, Telecommunications Major Austin Hepp, to create an introductory video for teenage students that would explore some of history’s key concepts. The film *Foundations of a History Course*, accessible online at [www.foundationsofhistory.org](http://www.foundationsofhistory.org), is meant to be an orientation video that can help students better understand what does history actually entail. Too often, students and adults dismiss the study of history as the memorization of a timeline of facts from the past that have little bearing on their daily lives. This project is meant to challenge this notion and other prominent historical misconceptions so that students can be better prepared to enter a history class that actually utilizes the discipline and forces students to employ historical thinking skills.

Upon deciding that the finished product was to be useful in the average history class, it quickly became apparent that something more than a paper would have to be produced. After considering the interests and learning styles of teenage students, it was decided that a film would be a great format that could deliver the project’s message in a manner that would be visually stimulating and more likely to hold a class’s interest. Since many teachers do not have the time to address the principles and objectives of the discipline or assume that past teachers have already informed students on the subject, creating a short film that addresses the key
components of a history class was an appropriate topic that could be highly beneficial to incoming students. To further capture the interest of students, nine different history instructors, ranging from junior high teachers to college professors, were interviewed in order to add variety to the film. This variety also helps to expose students to the key concept that despite the subject’s emphasis on historical facts, history is actually made up of a wide variety of opinions and interpretations. This was also a great opportunity for my own education as it allowed me to discuss the fundamental issues of a history class with experienced and highly qualified history teachers and learn from their experiences.

In preparation for these filmed discussions, interview questions were created that drew from my own knowledge of the main concepts of social studies education, as well as concepts obtained from additional research done for this project. The guiding principles for these questions came from the National Council for History Education’s (NCHE) “History’s Habits of Mind,” which organizes the perspectives and thought processes that should be explored in the history classroom, and the National Standards for History’s five types of historical thinking, specifically the skills of “historical comprehension” and “historical analysis and interpretation.” Outside research was utilized to understand and construct questions regarding the misconceptions students have about a history class and the tendency for some students and teachers to reduce history to a patriotic and egocentric rendition of a pro-American past. While the film’s subject is mainly abstract, it was important that specific examples were generated from the interviews, such as anecdotes about Betsy Ross and The Salem Witch Trials, in order
to provide students with some concrete examples that they could more easily relate to. In order to further organize the film, the interview subjects' responses were categorized into the five segments seen in the video: "Historical Perspectives," "The Relevancy of the Past to the Present," "History’s Interaction with the World," "How Do We Benefit From History?" and "Entertaining Approaches to History."

It was crucial for this project to examine the importance of perspective in the history classroom. By emphasizing perspectives and interpretations in the first segment, the film directly contradicts the stigma that history is just a collection of facts about the past. This is not to say that the facts are unimportant, as a number of the interview subjects state in the film, but they are not the end product of the discipline. By watching the film, viewers should understand that facts are the building blocks to constructing a historical narrative. While this generates a gray area that can lead to contradictions and misinterpretations, it also provides students with an excellent opportunity to construct their own understanding of the past. By introducing students to this higher level of historical thinking, viewers should understand that the answers to history's questions are not simply right or wrong. There is always room for interpretation.

In order to make this clear to the audience, the film challenges some commonly held historical views, such as questioning the morality of Christopher Columbus's acts in the New World. In elementary schools, students often receive a rose-colored depiction of Columbus as a heroic and daring explorer, but in the film, one of the interviewees, Tim Latimer, describes him as a "jerk." While the humorous description is likely to grab a teenager's interest, it is also reinforcing the idea that
historical narratives are constructed, including those narratives supplied by teachers and textbooks. To demonstrate this, the film includes a brief discussion regarding Betsy Ross and the myth that she created the first American flag. It is likely that after watching this segment viewers will relate to the comments made in the film by Mike Fassold that they have been lied to, but it demonstrates the importance of not passively absorbing another’s interpretation. One of the greatest challenges for a history teacher is to get students to stop mindlessly accepting what a textbook or expert tells them to think. History demands that students be inquisitive and proactive in order to sift through the various historical interpretations in order to construct their own in a way that is personal and meaningful.

The segment “The Relevancy of the Past to the Present” was included to help students appreciate how a historical education can help them better understand the world they live in today. Even as a social studies education major, it is sometimes difficult to draw the relevancy of the distant past to current events, so one can imagine that it can be extremely difficult for many teenage students to understand the value in the history curriculum. This film segment is designed to help viewers realize that the views and struggles that exist today are often the result of reactions to past events. While a comprehension of the past does not provide an individual with all of the answers to today’s problems, it does allow them to understand the challenges societies have faced in the past and exposes them to possible solutions. Both America’s current economic crisis and its involvement in the Middle East have strong ties to past events, as evidenced by news reporters’ constant references to
The Great Depression and the Vietnam War. While history never repeats itself exactly, students should be encouraged to discover patterns of events and similarities between the past and present. As reaffirmed by many of the film’s interviews, students become more interested when the past is connected to their own lives. Not only does this make history more relevant to them, it also helps them to better understand the historical foundations of current challenges. Once again, it comes down to the importance of understanding perspectives. By going beyond one’s own beliefs and instead trying to understand how the past has shaped the views of others, students are better prepared to live in a world that increasingly brings distinct cultures together.

The importance of understanding these outside societies is established in the film’s next section, “History’s Interaction with the World.” As Mike Fassold reinforces during this segment, one of the biggest obstacles to teaching history is to get students to appreciate the world that exists beyond their personal spheres of existence. While students very much appreciate it when history can be directly linked to their own lives, it is important to directly challenge the notion that all of history revolves around them or the United States. One of the goals of a history class should be to instill an appreciation of diverse cultures. As technology increasingly links the world’s populations together, it is imperative for students to avoid an egocentric perspective. It is tempting to watch news reports from foreign lands and to dismiss these outside cultures as bizarre and unrelated to Americans, but as many of the films interviewees state, “we are all people, and people have a tendency to respond in similar ways.” Despite the geographical distances, studying
the past of different cultures provides students with a sense of shared humanity and empathy for those who live outside of the local community.

America’s past has shown that there can be shameful consequences for failing to understand different cultures and populations. Chad Janney discusses in the film how Americans’ misplaced distrust and hatred toward the Japanese encouraged the roundup of Japanese-American citizens into internment camps during World War II, and Dr. Kevin Smith informs viewers how the fear of communism led to the removal of Far Eastern experts that left the United States ill-prepared for the Vietnam War. These examples will hopefully lead viewers to understand the dangers in not studying and appreciating outside cultures. While it is fine to take pride in one’s own society, a blind assumption of innate superiority leaves students ill-prepared for the realities of the modern world. America no longer stands unchallenged at the top of the global hierarchy. If Americans wish to continue to enjoy the comforts of the modern world and to accomplish foreign policy objectives, it is imperative to work with different states that view the world through a different historical lens. By studying these other perspectives, one strengthens the ability to work cooperatively with those of a foreign background.

Another of the film’s key objectives was to help viewers understand how a history class can be beneficial to students in their day-to-day lives. While this is intended to be a running theme throughout the film, it is most directly discussed in the section “How Do We Benefit From History?” It begins with a reassertion that history helps students to better understand the motives and causes behind today’s current events. Chad Janney claims in the film that social studies is the only adult
One of the topics one studies in high school is the sense that it is the only subject adults discuss with coworkers and friends on a regular basis. Since even a basic understanding of today's political, economic, and social issues requires knowledge of the issues' historical backgrounds, he is not wrong in asserting its importance at the water cooler, but a history education does more than keep an individual from embarrassing him or herself in front of one's peers while discussing the latest headlines.

The history classroom provides students with the opportunity to practice many of the skills that will be crucial to success later in their lives. Tim Latimar emphasizes the importance of learning how to work successfully in groups with partners and even people one does not get along with. While this opportunity certainly exists in other classrooms, a history class provides a vast variety of opportunities for interaction, ranging from group projects to role-playing to class debates. Students do not only get to work with others to accomplish a common goal, they can also have the opportunity to discuss and defend their ideas with their peers. One of the downsides of the recent technological explosion is the concern that young adults are missing out on learning how to interact with others face-to-face. A history class provides the perfect opportunity to make up for this by simulating many of the social interactions that occur in common job settings.

The film also emphasizes the critical thinking skills that are an important feature of a social studies education. Dr. Sarah Drake-Brown cites key analytical skills such as examining the context of a piece of work, identifying central issues, and judging the validity of an argument. These skills are practiced and refined when
students actually read and evaluate primary sources. Students are unlikely to read many historical documents in their adult lives, but regardless of their career choice, they are likely to read reports, e-mails, and articles. In order to be an informed and independent reader, they will have to employ the same skills utilized while exploring historical documents. Almost any upper tier career requires the ability to pull in relevant information from a variety of sources and perspectives and to evaluate its validity and usefulness. This is the same skill that is necessary in constructing a well-designed historical argument or essay. By emphasizing the importance of these historical thinking skills, the film is reinforcing to students how history is so much more than a collection of facts and figures. For teachers, it means that the history classroom has to be more than fun facts if students are to get the maximum benefits from the class.

While a majority of the film focuses on how history can be beneficial for students, it was important to also spend some time demonstrating how a history class can be entertaining. By sharing some of the interviewees’ innovative teaching methods, the section titled “Entertaining Approaches to History” seeks to encourage other teachers to make their classrooms more engaging, as well as push students to want a more interactive class. The two main objectives of the segment are to call for a history classroom that is both more interactive and relatable. Taking on the role of a historical figure or being a travel agent representing an ancient civilization helps students to develop their historical imagination by having them form a personal connection to a specific piece of history. A teacher can spend an entire class reciting off facts about a former president or foreign monarchy, but if he or she
is unable to make that person come alive and relatable to the students, it is highly unlikely that any of the information will be retained long-term.

Mr. Janney's activity of having students try to pick a new restaurant to come to the school cafeteria as a comparison to the difficulties Congress had under the Articles of Confederation is a great example of the full potential of a history class. It is an activity that takes something students know and care about, the food in their school cafeteria, and uses it to help students better understand the difficulties of the past. Mr. Janney could easily wrap up the message of this activity by just telling his students that Congress often argued and failed to get any legislation passed under the Articles of Confederation, thereby saving himself an entire class period of trying to organize and control a rather chaotic class activity, but so much would be lost in the process. Such an activity is far more likely to stay with students than a lecture or worksheet and further helps them comprehend the shared experiences and difficulties people have faced throughout time and space.

Upon completion of the film, the next task for the project was to find a means of distribution that would be the most accessible to classrooms. While a couple of DVD's were manufactured for the film's volunteers, DVD's were not a practical means for mass distribution given the project's budget and goals. Instead, the film was uploaded to the website www.foundationsofhistory.org, which can be accessed by anyone across the country. This proved to be a perfect form of distribution as it allows any school or classroom with Internet access to be able to show the film to a class, and even those classrooms that do not have online capabilities can have students watch the film at home or in a computer lab. The website is not limited by
a set number of copies, like DVD's would be, and allows instructors and students to view the film at their convenience.

While teachers are of course free to use the film however they think it will best benefit the students, it was made with the hope to introduce students to the benefits of history and to spark classroom discussions. As Mr. Latimar asks in the film, the ideas taught by history teachers and professors are ultimately their own opinions, so why not have students form their own? It is not the intent of this project for viewers to just accept the opinions presented in the film, which is partly why it includes nine different perspectives. There are going to be teachers and students that may disagree with some of the ideas introduced in the film, especially when it comes to the controversy that surrounds Christopher Columbus, Betsy Ross, and the US internment of Japanese citizens. These topics may only be discussed briefly in the film but are hopefully enough of a teaser to spark a student's curiosity and desire for more information. Having students merely watch a film as part of a lesson and then immediately move on to the next topic is leaving the first unfulfilled. Many of the ideas presented in the film challenge beliefs commonly held by students. After viewing the film, the teacher should encourage students to express their opinions about it and help correct any misunderstandings or confusion.

Without question, this has been an immensely satisfying project that has met the goals established at the onset of its creation. Having the opportunity to transform the knowledge gained at Ball State University into a product that can be accessed by classrooms across the nation has made all the time and effort it took worth it. Furthermore, discussing and editing ideas provided by experienced
history instructors about the foundational ideas of history has been incredibly beneficial in allowing me to further construct my own views on what it means to be a history teacher. It is not enough to know a lot about history and to be passionate about the subject. The ultimate goal is to get students excited about the subject and to provide them with the opportunities to make their own meaningful discoveries about the past and present. Teenage students may not always understand or appreciate the full potential of a history course, but hopefully this film will at least widen their perspectives and make it less of a chore every time they have to step into that history classroom.
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