

NOT YOUR PARENTS' HISTORY CLASS



BUELLER? BUELLER? THE IMAGE OF BEN STEIN'S SLEEPY-HEADED, GUM-POPPING HISTORY STUDENTS IN THE 80'S CLASSIC, FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF, IS PROBABLY NOT FAR FROM THE HISTORY CLASS ADULTS EXPERIENCED IN THEIR OWN HIGH SCHOOLS ACROSS AMERICA DURING THE LAST FEW DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY. GIVEN THIS, IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT PARENTS OF TODAY'S TEENAGERS MAY BELIEVE THEIR CHILD'S HISTORY CLASS EXPERIENCE WOULD MIMIC THEIR OWN. HOWEVER, THE TECHNOLOGY EXPLOSION, SHIFTS IN PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES, CHANGES IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION, AND THE INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS MOVING ON TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION HAVE CAUSED TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HISTORY CLASSROOMS TO LOOK VERY DIFFERENT FROM YEARS PAST. HERE IS A BREAKDOWN OF THE DIFFERENCES.

THEN: NO STATE STANDARDS

NOW: STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTION

Prior to 1996, the State of New Jersey had no academic learning standards for students, which resulted in content being left up to the schools. Content from classroom to classroom may have differed dramatically depending on the content preferences of teachers and interests of the students. In 1996, the state adopted its first set of learning standards which identified what students should know and be able to do by the end of their schooling. The adoption of standards narrowed down the focus of history instruction to a set of standards that all schools are required to follow. Teacher autonomy in the classroom is still a priority and teachers still work diligently at developing the most effective lessons that are now guided by the standards. It should be noted that the state has adopted standards for all academic areas and they are revised every five years.

THEN: CONTENT-BASED CURRICULUM

NOW: SKILLS-BASED CURRICULUM

While parents' history classes were content-based, focusing largely on the recall of facts and retrieval of information, today's history classes are skills-based, which focus more on the development of skills that will benefit students in college and career. These skills include reading, writing, speaking, and listening-- more commonly known as literacy skills-- as well as historical thinking skills. Today's teachers utilize tools such as Webb's Depth of Knowledge to create lessons and assessments that require students to apply a range of thinking skills, from basic recall to the synthesis of information from multiple sources. An outcome of this approach has been the addition of assessments that had historically been reserved for AP classes into all history classrooms. The book report-type writing that was common in classrooms of the past has now been replaced with analytical writing tasks, such as the DBQ (document-based question), which had historically been the hallmark of AP classes. Incorporating higher order thinking into all history classrooms has elevated instruction and assessment to better prepare students for life after high school.

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THEN: DATES AND PEOPLE NOW: HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS

Anyone who took a high school history class more than 20 years ago can probably recall asking the teacher “will we have to know dates?” And, the answer was most likely “Yes.” In today’s classroom, teachers are more focused on teaching students historical thinking skills rather than simply a timeline of events. Historical thinking skills allow students to develop a more comprehensive understanding of history. They help students analyze rather than simply describe historical events, explore multiple perspectives, and make connections between events past and present. The deliberate comparison of historical events to current events helps students see the relevance of history to their lives today.

THEN: ACCEPTING HISTORY AS A SET OF FACTS NOW: TEACHING HISTORICAL INQUIRY

History instruction of the past largely consisted of a series of historical events presented to students one after the other. In the past, history students accepted the facts as presented by their teachers or history books and were assessed solely on their recall of the facts. The facts, often presented from a single perspective drawn exclusively from secondary sources, were the focus of the lessons. This method has changed in recent years. Today, historical events are presented and analyzed from multiple perspectives through primary sources in order to give students firsthand accounts of the event. Viewing a historical event from the perspective of different groups allows students to have a more accurate understanding of the event and its consequences.

A common approach to teaching and learning in today’s history classrooms is the inquiry model. Through this model, students investigate a historical question by utilizing the techniques used by historians to evaluate multiple perspectives and make claims supported by credible evidence. This model is used by teachers to explore perspectives on historical figures, such as Christopher Columbus. In classrooms of the past, certain historical figures were presented from a single perspective, leaving no room for students to deliberate on the legacy of those figures. In today’s classroom, legacy is one of those topics that is ripe for use with the inquiry model where students can examine multiple perspectives and evaluate claims and evidence to come to their own conclusions about the impact of historical figures and events.

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THEN: BOOK RESEARCH NOW: DIGITAL RESEARCH

Anyone who went to school before the Internet remembers spending hours in a dusty library combing through books and feeding nickels into a copy machine. The Internet and digitization of information changed the entire research process, leading to the need to teach students digital research skills. In addition to teaching digital research skills, teachers today focus on equipping students with the skills needed to evaluate all sources for validity and credibility. The evaluation of sources, both digital and print, is a necessary historical research skill that adds to a student's ability to form a more comprehensive understanding of history as well as a way to manage the overflow of misinformation that is present all around them.

WHILE MANY ASPECTS OF HISTORY EDUCATION HAVE CHANGED OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, THERE ARE STILL CONSTANTS. SO, WHAT HASN'T CHANGED IN HISTORY CLASSROOMS?

Great Teachers!

Regardless of approach, pedagogy, instructional models and new research, great teachers have always existed. These are the teachers who make even the most mundane content come to life, the teachers who have classrooms full of engaged learners. They make connections with students, invest in their students' well being inside and outside the classroom, and making learning easy. Great teachers have always existed and will always exist.

Changing approaches to teaching History

With new research, the increased accessibility of information, and school districts' commitment to professional learning, the approaches to teaching and learning - in all subject areas - will undoubtedly change as we creep further into the 21st century. While history teachers focus largely on events of the past, their strategies used to teach these events will continue to develop into the future.

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