

Challenging History: Essential Questions in the Social Studies Classroom

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Something was missing in Mike Paredes’s classroom. A history teacher at an urban high school in Southern California, Mike had a good handle on content and a strong relationship with his students. But he worried that his students were not learning enough. After observing him teach several lessons, I understood Mike’s concern. The classroom worked largely because of the strength of “Mr. P’s” personality. His kids loved him and they willingly participated in a wide range of classroom activities. Mr. P. could explain the link between each activity and the larger themes of the time period being studied, but his students didn’t see the connections, as assessments made clear. Students left the classroom with a limited understanding of the ideas and issues of history.

The experience in Mr. P’s class is hardly unique. As a classroom teacher and teacher educator, I’ve observed dozens of similar classrooms, and research indicates that my observations mirror national trends.¹ Many history classrooms are led by well-intentioned, knowledgeable teachers who work hard to find and develop engaging activities that connect to the larger concepts of history. But, too often, these teachers are the ones doing all the thinking in the classroom. This dynamic needs to shift—teachers need to be facilitating student thinking.

One approach that my colleagues and I have found to be successful in supporting a move toward student ownership of historical understanding is the use of unit-framing, or essential questions. The concept of essential questions has recently received considerable attention thanks to the book *Understanding by*

Design.² However, the approach remains underutilized. Drawing on educational research and classroom experience, this article makes a case for why such an approach is appropriate in the history/social science classroom and gives examples of its application.

What are Essential Questions?

1. *Essential questions get to the heart of the discipline.*

Essential questions address the big ideas of history and social studies. These are the questions “that pose dilemmas, subvert obvious or canonical ‘truths’ or force incongruities to our attention.”³ These are not end-of-the-chapter questions that can be answered in a sentence or two; rather, they address the contested concepts and dilemmas that historians and social scientists puzzle over in their work.

2. *Essential questions have more than one reasonable answer.*

Unlike the typical question that has a single correct answer, an essential question has many possible answers, and discussing it often leads to even more questions. These questions are provocative and multi-layered, requiring students and teachers to view the content from multiple perspectives. Essential questions can be re-visited often and are most powerful when they encourage us to form, not just a single response, but multiple carefully nuanced responses.

3. *Essential questions connect the past to the present.*

We study history, in part, because the dilemmas and concerns faced by our predecessors are often similar to those we face today.⁴ Unfortunately, many of our students do not see these connections. Essential questions provide an opportunity to show the link between the past and the present, because they are not tied specifically to a given time or place. They address perennial concerns to which each generation must respond anew:

Should there be limits on personal freedom?

When is violence justified?

Who should have access to the American dream?

Do we have a responsibility to help others?

Are the benefits of progress worth the costs?

Can we have both liberty and security?

Is it better to work together or alone?

Why are Essential Questions Appropriate in the History Classroom?

1. Essential questions enable students to construct their own understanding of the past.

Essential questions give students responsibility for grappling with ideas and information through a critical lens, and force them to decide how to interpret historical data. Students, supported by teachers, do the “thinking work” to make sense of history.

2. Essential questions reveal history to be a developing narrative.

Too often, when history is taught as a collection of facts, students view history as “fixed and stable, dropped out of the sky readymade.”⁶ Historians, however, see their work as anything but fixed. To them, historical understanding is a human construction, and written history is “a dialogue among historians not only about what happened, but about why and how it happened, how it affected other happenings, and how much importance it ought to be assigned.”⁷ Engaging students in the study of history through the use of essential questions allows them to become apprentice historians.

3. Essential questions challenge students to examine their own beliefs.

Students come to class with beliefs shaped by parents, peers, and the media. Their opinions are often cast in black and white terms (Lincoln was good; the South was bad) without recognition of the many complex forces that shape individu-

als and events. When investigating an essential question, students are pressed to examine multiple events and multiple perspectives. For example, “When is violence justified?” is a question that can be examined by analyzing the writings of American soldiers fighting on Okinawa during World War II; Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb; and political decision makers in Washington. It can also be debated by considering present-day wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the attack on the World Trade Center; and students’ personal encounters with violence in their own lives. Considering and re-considering the question from multiple perspectives and through multiple case studies “cultivates puzzlement.”⁹ Students are pushed out of their comfortable assumptions and forced to consciously examine the “nature, conditions, and bearings” of their beliefs.¹⁰

4. Essential questions prepare students for participation in civic society.

The skills and aptitudes that students learn from thoughtful consideration of essential questions are those needed in our democratic citizenry: a willingness to examine multiple perspectives, ask thoughtful questions, seek out additional information, debate ideas with peers, consider the causes and potential consequences of actions, and re-consider our own opinions and understanding in light of new evidence or alternative analyses.¹¹

How can Essential Questions be Effectively Utilized in the History Classroom?

The effective use of essential questions was illustrated in Mr. P’s classroom. For the past three years, Mike Paredes and I have been working together to plan and teach units of study organized around essential questions. The guidelines below represent our learning as we’ve worked together to develop effective units of study.

1. Carefully select a question that will bring to life the issues of the time and place to be studied.

A recent unit in Mr. P’s U.S. history class focused on the 1920s. The relevant items in our state curriculum call for investigating the changing role of women, examining the passage of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, and discussing the “domestic events, interests, and philosophies that prompted attacks on civil liberties.”¹³ Recognizing that personal freedom is a theme that runs throughout many of the events of that era, Mr. P. decided to frame the unit with the question, “Should there be limits on personal freedom?”

2. Introduce the unit by building connections to familiar concerns.

As teenagers, most students have had a great deal of experience with limits on personal freedom. Mr. P. knew that building on these experiences would help to hook students into the unit and get them thinking about the issues involved. Mr. P placed placards around the room numbered one through ten. He then proceeded to list a series of restrictions familiar to most of his students: Dress codes, curfews, drivers’ license restrictions, limits on alcohol and drug use, etc. As he called out a restriction, students “took a stand” by standing beside the number that best reflected their beliefs regarding its appropriateness, from one (very appropriate) to ten (very inappropriate). Students then had to explain their reasoning to their peers.

The ensuing discussions illuminated concerns and prompted questions that would have relevance throughout the unit: How can you balance safety of one person with the rights of another person? Who should have the power to make restrictions? When should the government act like a parent? When is it freedom of speech and when is it hate speech? By starting with the familiar, Mr. P. provided the opportunity for students to develop an analytical frame

that could be used as they moved toward other, less familiar case studies from history.

3. *Dig deeper through the use of historical case studies.*

Case studies encourage students to recognize multiple perspectives, to consider causes and consequences, and to avoid “present-mindedness” by understanding the historical context during which events unfold.¹⁴ Mr. P. selected three case studies that students would investigate in greater detail: The changing role of women and the shifting dynamics of the family, the passage of the Volstead Act (Prohibition), and rising racial tensions seen most prominently in the resurgence of the KKK.

Each of these case studies provided students with the opportunity to dig into a slice of the past, and each illuminated further complexities within the essential question about personal freedom:

- Should women be free to vote? To pursue interests outside of the home? How does the greater freedom for women impact the rest of the family?
- Should alcohol be prohibited? If so, for whom? Is it possible to restrict it for some and not others? Does a ban on a chemical substance cause more problems than it solves?
- Should people be allowed to express their opinions even when those opinions are racist? What happens when allowing personal freedom for some restricts the personal freedoms of others? Whose freedoms are more important?

The case studies were interesting on their own, but by looking at them through the lens of personal freedom, Mr. P’s students were able to engage with the historical events more thoughtfully and analytically. They learned more about a time period in history by exam-

ining it through an essential question and, conversely, they learned more about the complexities of the question by examining cases from history.

4. *Use primary source documents to encourage students to recognize multiple perspectives.*

Within the scope of a case study, the use of primary source documents provides necessary opportunities for students to move outside of their own perspective to recognize other views. Most students in Mr. P’s class initially approached the issue of prohibition, for example, with incredulity: it seemed ridiculous for the government to try to ban alcohol consumption. Mr. P then passed out transcripts the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings 1926 regarding the effectiveness of the new law. As students read testimonials from women who had been physically, emotionally, and financially abused by their husbands, their views began to change. Grappling with the contradictions between testimonies provided by the Federal Council of Churches and the anti-prohibition arguments made by Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia and others forced students to recognize the challenges that arise in the making of public policy.

5. *Require regular reflection on the larger question in light of new information and ideas.*

Mr. P prompted students to reflect by initiating informal discussions, Socratic seminars, and journal writing. Such opportunities to reflect on an essential question were placed at several points in a unit of study, not relegated solely to the end of the unit.

Moving Toward Thoughtfulness

The following excerpts from one eleventh-grade student’s journal illustrate the progression of his thinking during the unit. DeShawn was one of Mr. P’s most recalcitrant students. At the beginning of the unit, his response to the question “Should there be limits on personal freedom?” was a strong, “Heck, no!” He’d

run afoul of curfew, dress code, and school attendance rules and resented these restrictions on his freedom.

As the unit progressed, however, DeShawn’s views became more tempered. After role-playing the father in a simulation designed to show the change in family dynamics in the 1920s, he wrote,

Things changed really fast. I can see why the man would be upset and feel like he’d lost control of his family. I still don’t think the government should make rules that stop the girls to cut their hair or wearing short skirts, but I think I see why the father would want them to.

Prohibition testimonials, further challenged DeShawn’s original position of absolute personal freedom. After analyzing these documents, he reflected,

It doesn’t seem right that nobody should be able to drink alcohol but it also doesn’t seem right that women and kids should be hurt by the men who get drunk. If it was now I’d tell the women to just get a divorce. But it was different then, women couldn’t just leave the husband. I don’t think that everybody should have had to stop drinking, it seems like that only causes more problems, but maybe some people should lose the right to drink if they don’t take care of their families.


The greatest challenge to DeShawn’s views came during the investigation of the rise of the KKK. He was outraged by the racist rhetoric, lynchings, and intimidation tactics of KKK members. In this case, he felt, the government had to do something. DeShawn wrote,

I’m confused. I still think that most of the time it’s better for everybody if the government just leaves people alone, but it’s not

right how people use their freedom. I don't think it's right that the KKK and racists like them can spread hate and I think that that should be against the law. But other groups, like women, should be able to march to try to get the right to vote. Problem is, if the government can stop one group from doing their thing, how do we know it won't stop other groups?

Over the course of the unit, DeShawn moved from voicing strident certainty to recognizing the tenuous balance between liberty and security. Grappling with an essential question forced him to do much more than express a personal opinion; he had to deal with historical and current issues, listening to the experiences and opinions of his fellow citizens in the present (his classmates) and in the past (through historical documents). Reconciling these many voices is rarely easy. DeShawn's "confusion" represented real learning.

Conclusion

By providing a critical frame through which to study history, essential questions have the potential to engage students in thinking deeply about the content under investigation. In Mr. P's class, the move to essential questions led to significantly greater student engagement, much more consistent attendance and homework completion, and a 15-point increase in standardized test scores. Perhaps more importantly, as reported by a student in an end-of-year course evaluation, students began to conceptualize their study of the past more critically: "This class made me think more than any other class I've ever had. I learned a lot about history, but I learned even more about how to think about history." 

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Notes

1. See, for example, Ronald S. Byrnes, "Interrupting Ordinary Expectations in the Social Studies," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 12 (1997): 135-151; Larry Cuban, "History of Teaching in Social Studies," in *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*, ed. James P. Shaver (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1991), 197-209.
2. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).
3. Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 127.
4. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004).
5. William B. Stanley, "Social Studies and the Social Order: Transmission or Transformation?" *Social Education* 69 (2005): 282-286.
6. Quote from Bruce A. VanSledright, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically ... and How Do You Teach It?" *Social Education* 68 (2004): 232 based on research presented by Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2001), 63-88 and Bruce VanSledright, "I Don't Remember- the Ideas Are All Jumbled in My Head: Eighth Graders Reconstructions of Colonial American History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 10 (1995): 317-345.
7. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, Calif.: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).
8. See, for example, Terrie L. Epstein, "Deconstructing Differences in African-American and European-American Adolescents' Perspectives on U.S. History," *Curriculum Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (1998): 397-423.
9. Sam Wineburg, (see note 6), 21.
10. John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: D.C. Heath, 1910), 5.
11. Charlotte Crabtree, Gary Nash, Paul Gagnon, and Scott Waugh, *Lessons from History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire* (Los Angeles, Calif.: The National Center for History in the Schools, 1992), 2.
12. Carole Hahn, *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998).
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14. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*.

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