

## ACTIVE LEARNING IN AMERICAN HISTORY CLASS

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Lost in the vast recesses of dates and names, battles and economic forces, my American history class struggled to choose correctly from among a dizzying number of a-b-c-d "pick-a-winner" multiple-choice questions. Where, I asked myself, is the joy of history? Where is the human experience that makes history speak to those who will hear? On a more practical level I asked myself how much of this content was actually acquired? What would be remembered in a few years? I found myself saying too often, "Imagine yourself . . . how would you feel?" In the end I asked myself, "Why not let them feel, in so far as the limits of time and the classroom will allow?" Why not?

My classes have always been regular classes with mainstreamed students. When I began teaching American history, it was a required 9th grade class, but now it is required of 10th graders. My class sizes have ranged from 15-25 students. I have found these activities to be especially effective for those students who were not highly motivated in history class.

### Exploration

The first opportunity to engage the students actively presented itself in a discussion about the motivations of the explorers of the New World and the reactions of the American inhabitants. On the surface the explorers seem to represent advancement and, therefore, their actions appeared to the students to be justified. I had some trouble getting them to understand the hubris of these men who so blithely declared land belonging to others as possessions of their nations.

The way to help them understand occurred to me in connection with our nearly-new gymnasium. One day we formed ourselves as an expedition and sallied forth from the classroom on an exploratory mission. Lo and behold, we discovered a wonderful, large enclosure with an exceptionally fine floor. The locals we found were strangely dressed and wore shoes of marvelous design. Planting the flag we had made before we left the classroom, we declared the area to be the possession of our nation. We even took a prisoner and returned with him to our country (classroom). We had enough time to consider and discuss what happened. To be honest, for most of the students the dominant reaction was pleasure at "getting out" of American history class. But subsequent discussion showed some greater understanding of what it meant to claim land in the New World. I counted this first experiment a success. Perhaps the real success was simply that the activity was carried out without any students disappearing into the bathrooms or staying behind in the gym to shoot baskets.

## French and Indian War

The next opportunity came with the French and Indian War. This project caused me to laugh the most. In order to prepare the students for an understanding of military strategy in that war and the Revolutionary War, I introduced the British military square. After a few minutes of explanation at the board, which left it looking as if I had diagramed some insane play in athletics, we were off to the parking lot to give it a try. To those who had listened, it seemed simple, but not all had listened. As we practiced shooting-kneeling-reloading and facing attacks from various sides, we saw students fall in droves as they forgot to kneel after they shot their imaginary muskets and were shot in the back of the head by the soldier behind. When most had seen the light as a result of their "valorous" deaths on the battlefield from friendly fire, we returned to the classroom with a new appreciation for the discipline involved in that type of fighting. However, the students were quick to pick up on its weaknesses, too. So the stage was set for the French and Indian War as well as Lexington and Concord. This year I plan to videotape the exercise so that the class can analyze what happened and what went wrong. This should provide some new insights as well as a few laughs.

Our school is fortunate to have an outdoor classroom that became for our class the American frontier. I divided the class into two groups. The "Indians" melted into the underbrush without much encouragement from me. I gave them about ten minutes and then the "British" proceeded to occupy the territory. I suppose I should say attempted to occupy the territory. The guerrilla tactics of the Indians were clearly demonstrated to be superior as our military square tried to press its way along narrow wilderness paths. The square was repeatedly lengthened and it, therefore, lost its effectiveness. Followup discussion showed a deeper understanding of military strategy as did the responses on essay tests. All in all, the activity made its point and was enjoyable, especially when the weather cooperated.

## Starting a Nation

The unit that is often called "Starting a Nation" or some such description that covers the period from the Declaration of Independence through the Constitutional Convention offered a number of activities centered around the creation of our nation. On various days and in various groupings the class chose a name for their country, designed a flag, wrote a pledge of allegiance, and the musically-inclined composed a national anthem. Then we formed ourselves into a convention and began to write our own constitution. The only problem I had with this activity was the students' desire to simply adopt the U.S. Constitution. I dealt with this by stirring up some gender trouble. Should the gender minority (depending on the composition of the class) have more voting power in the legislature to insure it would not be abused by the majority? Should the constitution require that the executive be a certain gender? How else might the minority be protected from the tyranny of the majority? We thus arrived quite naturally at the Bill of Rights. While these

activities took quite a few days, they were a good combination of cerebral and physical activity, and essay tests showed that much was learned.

### Civil War

Theatrics is a more appropriate word to characterize the next activity that tied into the Civil War era. The first challenge was to choose the person to play the starring role in the little play. Since the person was to be "sold" as a slave, it was necessary to choose someone with a strong ego who could take some public abuse in stride. I usually gave the student I selected a general idea of what I was going to do before I asked permission to make him or her my victim. When everything was in place, I dragged out my black box which I use as a soapbox when I want to express my own opinions, picked up my pointer, and presented for sale at auction one perfectly healthy slave. The buyers were invited to check his or her teeth, squeeze muscles, and otherwise inspect the merchandise. What has interested me the most is the response of the buyers. After some initial giggling enjoyment, the students found themselves rather embarrassed by what was going on. Personal-response essays showed that the reality of the "slave's" humiliation hurt them, and I was only left with the task of explaining how this activity was merely a shadow of what slavery was about in terms of human degradation.

### The Gold Rush

A social studies teacher never knows what resources will be needed to do the job. In the case of the Gold Rush, it was a can of gold spray paint, some small stones, dirt, a bucket, and a pan. So one day we panned for gold. I cannot say that this was completely successful because it required my attention to small groups while the others were not engaged in the activity. I am not sure that I would use this one again and have toyed with other ideas to replace it, e.g. a reenactment of Preston Brooks's attack on Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate.

### Industrialization

The stark realities that were reenacted in the activity related to the Industrial Revolution made it exceedingly difficult in terms of student discipline. It was not enjoyable and was not meant to be. It meant that the students had to be kept on task for a full class period and that task was not to their liking. Therefore, the discipline had to be carried out by sheer force of will of the foreman, who was me. In accord with accounts of workers in the early days of factory production who reported harshness from their superiors, I made no effort to be kind or personable in any way. I was severe and critical of their work. The students arrived that day to a dark classroom. The windows were open and the room was cold. If I could have found a safe way to make the room smoky, I would have. They were now assembly line workers. They were told to form a circle and "be quiet about it." There

was no talking while working. I then presented them with a large bolt that contained a washer and a nut. As per instructions, the first worker was to take off the nut and hand both the nut and the bolt to the next worker who was to take off the washer and hand all three to the next worker who was to put the washer back on and hand both to the next worker who was to put the nut on . . . and on . . . and on. At first the students thought it was funny. I then produced 20 such bolts and began the line. No talking was allowed, and I often berated them for being so slow. Soon it was no longer funny, it was stupid. Irritation increased as minutes seemed like hours. By the end of the forty minutes, I was having great difficulty keeping them on task.

The activity, I admit, does not come close to recreating the deadening, poverty-stricken lives those workers must have led, but personal-reaction essays showed that it caused the students to think seriously about assembly line work. I know for a fact that it made one student reevaluate his goals. This student was simply not able to keep up in the line. At one point I noticed a number of bolts were missing from production. He had stuffed them into his pockets when they piled up. He realized, I believe, that what had seemed to him the easy road after a lackluster career in high school was not what it seemed to be. He went on to college rather than enter directly into the work force with only a high school diploma in hand.

#### World Wars

I do not believe there is any real way to create an activity that allows a true simulation of war. I have experimented with a few ways in our school's gifted program. I tried making the students the joint chiefs of staff coping with a military emergency. Also people who have been in combat have spoken to my classes about their experiences. Both were effective, but they did not catch the magnitude of the issue.

The activity I have used in the classroom is aimed at the competitive nature of nationalism. After all, the class had already formed itself into a nation. Suddenly the class (nation) began receiving threats and insults from the world history class that met at the same time. These "attacks" were dismissed at first. Even the delivery of a formal declaration of war from the "other" history class was not taken too seriously. Then I began having the students from the previous class turn the desks over before they left. Now my American history students were getting irritated. They asked who disturbed the "peace" of their nation. I answered the world history class had done it. Some grumbling resulted the first time, and by the third time the declaration of war was mutual. The battlefield was an academic quiz bowl complete with buzzers. It was hotly contested and enthusiastically watched. My class complained a little because the world history class had already had American history. This led to a lively discussion about whether any two nations go to war with equal resources. The war was won by world history students and accepted by my class, but it seemed to leave them bitter. These feelings were used to explain events in pre-World War II Germany.

## Evaluation

Since these activities were designed to appeal to the student in the affective domain, evaluation was somewhat difficult. I was also very careful how I assessed the value of the activities since I believe that many a brilliant lesson has been ruined by the tiresome worksheet that followed it.

The key to assessment was discussion, discussion, and more discussion. If the discussion lagged or too few students took part, I assigned a personal-response essay. Evidence of learning as a result of these activities could be found in the students' essay answers on chapter tests. In a less formal way I measured success by the number of times students asked me about upcoming activities and how often they talked to each other about what had happened as they left the classroom.

Long-term learning has been demonstrated to me when former students reminded me of past activities and shared memories with me. Students who visit me after they have gone on to college have told me that they have shared what we did in American history class with their college history classes.

Overall, I believe these activities were worthwhile. I worried that the time lost from "content" material would be a price that was too high to pay. I suppose that with the pressure of state achievement tests that argument might be valid. However, I do know that the students enjoyed the activities and that they remembered them long after the course was over. Their contributions in discussion and responses in essays demonstrated a deeper understanding of the material.

Sometimes I fear that we teach something else when we put so much emphasis on names, dates, and battles. We teach hatred for a subject that should be the most interesting class in school—history.