

Finding Citizenship and Place in State History:

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS THROUGH DIVERSE NARRATIVES

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In Texas, students study state history in the fourth and seventh grades. Considering the continual increase in the state's immigrant populations, how can state history help students of diverse backgrounds find place and meaning within the curriculum—thereby, improving how students value and understand citizenship? To answer this question, I would like to offer practical suggestions for upper elementary and middle school teachers. These ideas emerged from our research conducted in 2005 with a group of six immigrant students (two Indian American females, one Iranian American female, one Pakistani American female, one Chinese American male, and one U.S. born Latino male). Their interactions and responses during lessons about Texas history prompted my thinking on the possible means for embracing and empowering similar students. These students were in the seventh grade, but I've written the article keeping in mind the needs of fourth as well as seventh grade students.

Ways to Make Connections

From my first encounters with these students, I discovered their need to connect personally with the curriculum. One student, Rhonda, indicated that she wanted to “learn the things that affected who I am today,” but she questioned whether Texas history could provide answers.¹ Another student, Pam, revealed her belief

that history should teach her “about the ancestors and everything” because “it gives me [her] an understanding of who I am,” and because “life was really different back then.” She could not understand, however, how Texas history might help her become a better American citizen. Kurt wished that he could study something “more broader like world history” because Texas history is “too narrow,” “too boring,” and “too repetitive.”

To address these concerns, I began searching for ways to bridge the gap between our textbook's version of Texas history and the students' personal lives. They met my efforts with renewed energy and enthusiasm, and together we uncovered possibilities for inclusion rather than exclusion. Their engagement with the material resulted in a transformation: their appreciation for and their understanding of Texas history burgeoned as they began to recognize and to affirm their place within the curriculum.

These five suggestions summarize what I learned from this effort:

1. **FOCUS ON THE LIVES OF PEOPLE:** Read and share biographies, autobiographies, and personal narratives from the lives of famous and everyday people.

2. **EMPHASIZE THE EXPERIENCES OF DIVERSE GROUPS:** Discover and explore the contributions of underrepresented groups, especially immigrant populations. Considering multiple viewpoints

helps students understand history's multilayered complexities.

3. **AFFIRM OUR COLLECTIVE IMMIGRANT PAST:** Remember the term “immigrant” historically applies to most people in the United States. Personal narratives from any era of U.S. history include many examples of families and individuals who left their homes to journey to a new land.

4. **INCLUDE STUDENTS' INTERESTS IN THE LESSONS:** Build on students' inherent interests as you plan lessons, and facilitate research as students explore those interests.

5. **EXAMINE A VARIETY OF PRIMARY DOCUMENTS:** Employing a host of visual and audio primary documents during lessons (i.e., photographs, news clippings, video footage, and oral histories) fosters contextual understandings and enables students to examine the evidence of history.

Focus on the Lives of People

Studying history through the lens of people facilitates the identification with remote peoples and with distant time periods. This approach challenges students to consider what it means to be human, especially how individuals' choices shaped outcomes. As we approached history from a more intimate perspective, we discovered that all human beings—regardless of racial, socioeconomic, or gendered differences—experienced joy,

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suffering, happiness, peace, pain, and fear. This vantage point enabled us to focus on the actions and reactions of people to social, political, and economic circumstances.

For our unit on World War II, the students learned about the experiences of Texas soldiers (called “Texas T-Patchers,” named after the patches of the letter T on their uniforms) in the Italian campaigns, the captives of the Lost Battalion (from the U.S.S. Houston), and the women in state WASP (Women Air Force Service Pilots) camps. The students read personal narratives, biographical sketches, letters, and diaries. The Texas Military Forces Museum (on the web at www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org) at Camp Mabry in Austin, Texas proved an invaluable resource for the soldiers’ photos, notebooks, letters, newspapers, and scrapbooks. The students also enjoyed Kyle Thompson’s *Lost Battalion: Railway of Death* about his time as prisoner of war in the South Pacific.² Thompson’s narration of the hardships associated with toiling in the jungle, enduring poor living conditions, and missing his family at home appealed to the students’ sensitivities, imaginations, and curiosities. Naomi explained, “I used to look at the big picture, but now after learning about the Texas T-Patchers and Lost Battalion, I can now see the inside view. How the soldiers felt. How people were thinking about it.”

The emphasis on everyday Texans helped the students realize that history was not just about famous adults, but about ordinary young men and young women serving their country. Rhonda commented, “I never realized how much individuals contributed to World War II ... but now I realize ... there were the little things that made it what it was.” Hannah stated, “Well, I used to think of World War II as a big war, and now I see it from an individual point-of-view.” The personal aspects of the war helped the students overcome their former indifference through the development of new understandings.

Emphasize Diverse Experiences

We discovered, embedded within the history of the Texans in World War II, diverse groups that played active roles. Juan appreciated the story of a heroic Mexican American who earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his fierce grenade attacks at the Battle of Salerno. Manuel “Ugly” Gonzales (a complimentary nickname referring to his Herculean feats), disarmed the Nazi ammunitions despite the enemy’s repeated attempt to stop him. When Gonzalez attempted to forcefully push through the shelling from Nazi soldiers, his backpack caught on fire. Then his comrades watched in amazement as—with his backpack ablaze and his chest torn from the shelling—he removed the pack and launched several grenades, destroying a machine gun, an anti-tank gun, an ammunition dump, and a mortar. The U.S. military later awarded Gonzalez the Distinguished Service Cross. Juan commented, “they [the T-Patchers] underestimated Ugly,” but “he [Gonzales] kept on destroying enemy artillery without rest.” Later, Juan indicated, the war “was a place where heroes were made.”

We also used the oral history collection at the Go For Broke Education Foundation (www.goforbroke.org), where there is a collection of video interviews with Japanese American war veterans (some of whom were Texas T-Patchers). The students responded powerfully to the veterans’ experiences. The notions of honor, identity, and patriotism became pivotal discussion points for the students, who identified with the soldiers’ torn allegiances—namely the conflict between sentiments for their ancestral past, and civic duty toward (and feelings of patriotism for) the United States.

Kurt commented, “it [the soldiers’ loyalty] was no longer about race; it was about what side you were on.” He further stated that the oral histories “helped him feel a part of the thing [the war experience].” Hannah also responded to the veterans’ stories, “You have to be very brave to stand up against your enemies, but you have to be even braver to stand

up against your own country [of ethnic origin].”

While young Japanese American men fought the Axis powers in the European theater, their families back in the states suffered from the bitter persecution of the World War II internment camps.³ In Texas, there were three camps: in Seagoville, Crystal City, and Kenedy (which is spelled correctly with one “n”). The patriotism displayed by the Japanese Americans in the U.S. military stands in stark contrast to the prejudice they and their families faced from fellow U.S. citizens. Resources regarding the Texas internment camps include Diane Yancey’s *Life in a Japanese Internment Camp* and Catherine Welch’s *Children of the Relocation Camps*.⁴

Affirm Our Collective Immigrant Past

A large majority of people within the borders of the United States can trace some or all of their ancestry to immigrants, whether they arrived on these shores voluntary or involuntarily under servitude or slavery. Recognizing and embracing this truth should remind students of our shared characteristics. State histories contain stories of immigrants who traveled in search of new opportunities; garnering these stories can improve students’ knowledge of ethnic relations.

For example, in the early 1800s, U.S. citizens (mostly from the Southern states) journeyed to the province of Mexico (formerly owned by Spain) to begin new lives. When they arrived, they encountered native Mexicans already living in vibrant communities, like San Antonio.⁵ A study of the interactions of these two groups can provide unique insights into the history of immigrant relations in land that is now part of the state of Texas. Who is a “new immigrant?” Who is a “native Texan?” The answers may not be so simple.

Include Students’ Interests

Lassoing students’ inherent interests into lessons can heighten motivation and improve learning. At the beginning of

the course, I asked the students to share with me what they wanted to know more about. Four girls wished they could learn more about the contributions of women. In response to their inquiries, I collected photographs, letters and diaries, and multimedia material about Texans who were Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). These resources were available at the Wings Across America in Waco, Texas, and some are online at www.wingsacrossamerica.us/wasp. These students responded with enthusiasm to learning about women in the military, while boys in the class were happy to join the discussion.

The students honed in on gender roles, specifically the impact of the WASP in challenging traditional assumptions about women's capabilities. Kurt noted that the women (like the men) stood in military formations, performed marches and drills, and flew planes. Girls, however, questioned whether the women were simply employed out of necessity. Heidi commented, "I never knew that women even contributed. . . . I was really impressed because the women were testing the planes and everything, but then I sort of figured out that they were just desperate and just using the women. But it was an improvement over what [women] had before."


Rhonda provided another perspective in her statement: "If the men were up there, and the women were still back here, I think the WASP in the World War II effort pushed [women] up and made them just as equal. They did the same work that the men did. I wouldn't say that it modernized [all of society], but it made the whole sexist thing kind of lessen." As these discussions continued, students took ownership of their developing ideas.

Examine Primary Documents

Providing the students with a variety of visual and audio primary source resources fostered deeper contextual insights. The photograph collections housed at the Texas Military Forces Museum contained images taken by soldiers during the Italian campaigns. These collections provided intimate, close-up perspectives. Examining the pictures enabled students to encounter the everyday, ordinary aspects of the Italian invasion, as highlighted in the collection. As a result, the students were able to place themselves in the shoes of the soldiers. Of this, Kurt commented, "it [the photograph] made me feel a part of the war and seeing other events happen, instead of just reading about them. It gives you a better idea of what really went on."

The "Go For Broke" National Education Center website included videos that reveal veterans' facial expressions and tones of voice, www.goforbroke.org/history/history_historical_campaigns_rescue.asp. As a result, the students drew deeper, more personal connections. For example, Rhonda identified with the story of a Japanese American veteran, who spoke of the persecution he suffered in school after Pearl Harbor and of his subsequent service in the U.S. military. More recently, after the 9-11 attacks, Rhonda faced similar challenges from school children teasing about her Iranian background and clothing; thus, the veteran's story paralleled her own in key respects. Rhonda said, "If I was right there interviewing someone, or if I was watching someone, I think that would be, remarkable. . . . That would be a great honor, for me to get to interview someone."

Conclusion

State history can connect to the lives of immigrant children. By discovering history's humanizing narratives, students can become more engaged with the curriculum and more appreciative of their roles as state, national, and global citizens. Appreciating and finding value in students' unique perspectives and affirming their place within America's narrative are vital to their involvement and academic success. Rhonda expressed her renewed appreciation for learning about Texas history, "Well, I am really glad I did it [participated in the project] ... because it really opened my eyes." As she came to understand that the contributions of ordinary citizens could influence history, she came to value her own connection to the peoples of Texas. With careful and persistent effort, a teacher can open students' eyes so that they may find their place as citizens. 

Notes

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. Kyle Thompson, *Lost Battalion: Railway of Death* (New York: ibooks, 1994).
3. Emily Brosveen, "World War II Internment Camps," in *The Handbook of Texas Online* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997-2002), www.tsha.texas.utexas.edu/handbook/online.
4. Diane Yancey, *Life in a Japanese Internment Camp* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1998); Catherine Welch, *Children of the Relocation Camps* (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 2000).
5. Randolph Campbell, *Gone to Texas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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