

# A New Way to Teach History

A curriculum now being developed enables students to engage with the subject at a deeper level.

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Efforts to improve education outcomes focus overwhelmingly on reading and math. Science often gets a nod. But social studies or history? Those subjects are generally overlooked, with many elementary schools barely teaching them at all. At higher grade levels, students often find the material boring.

The result: students don't know much about history. On the most recent national tests in US history, only 13 percent of eighth-graders scored "proficient" or above.

History textbooks can be dense and dry, and teachers may be ill-equipped to come up with engaging material to replace or supplement them. One survey found that only about 40 percent of social studies teachers have an undergraduate degree in history, and they're disproportionately likely to take on additional school-related duties. For example, nearly 34 percent coach an athletic team, teach physical education, or both.

“It’s really hard to get a history teaching job if you’re not a coach,” a Texas teacher told me recently.

But there are good reasons to elevate the status of history in the K-12 curriculum. One study found that elementary students from lower-income families who got more social studies than average did better on reading comprehension tests by fifth grade. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, that’s likely because social studies provided them with the knowledge and vocabulary needed to understand the passages on the test.

And teaching more history is probably the best way to address the lack of civics knowledge that many bemoan. History can provide the context that enables students to understand and retain concepts like “checks and balances.”

There are signs that history is starting to get more respect, including the launch of the History Matters Campaign, which promotes high-quality elementary history curricula. (I serve on the board of the campaign’s parent organization.) And a curriculum is now under development that could yield dramatic improvements in history instruction.

### **The Four Question Method**

That curriculum is the brainchild of Jon Bassett and Gary Shiffman, two former high school social studies teachers who created an approach to teaching historical topics called the Four Question Method, which I’ve written about before. (I serve on the advisory board for their organization, 4QM Teaching.) It’s also described in their book, From Story to Judgment.

Briefly, the “four questions” are:

1. **What happened?** Students create a narrative of the major developments in a historical event in the form of a storyboard.
2. **What were they thinking?** Students explore what the historical actors believed they were doing, often using primary sources.
3. **Why then and there?** Students investigate why a particular event happened at the time and place it did.
4. **What do we think about that?** As a last step, students debate a question that requires judgment about the event.

Bassett and Shiffman originally thought that if they just disseminated the framework, teachers would adapt it to whatever topics they were teaching. But, as they recently wrote on their blog, they came to realize that most busy teachers don't have the bandwidth to do that. So they decided to write a curriculum grounded in their method, beginning with a course in US history geared to eighth grade.

That curriculum, which covers the period from 1492 to 1877, is now almost finished, and it's being beta-tested by a group of teachers around the country. In their post, Bassett and Shiffman say they've "learned a ton" from those teachers, and that they're tweaking and improving lessons based on the feedback they've gotten.

I was curious about how the beta testing was going, so I asked Bassett and Shiffman to connect me with some of the participating teachers. I spoke to a total of six in a variety of settings. While I heard a few suggestions for improvement (that's what beta testing is all about), all of them said they felt their teaching had become more effective as a result of the curriculum.

Here's what they told me:

**Many kids arrive at middle school with little knowledge of history.** That's because of the narrow focus on reading and math in elementary school. A couple of the teachers I spoke with said they have little trouble catching kids up on what they've missed, but at least one found the situation challenging, noting that her students arrive in eighth grade with "pretty much zero knowledge" about history.

"At least half of my kids have never been more than 20 to 50 miles outside town," said Stacie Dixon, who teaches in a low-income, rural part of eastern Texas. "So they haven't been going to museums or historic sites." Most don't know what the American Revolution was, she said, and if shown a map of the US would only be able to identify Texas and perhaps nearby Louisiana. "Even the higher-achieving students struggle," she said, "because there's so much they've never learned."

**The 4QM approach enables teaching at a deeper level.** "The way that our curriculum/classes were set up before did not really allow for this level of discussion," Blake Waller, who teaches in a Texas district similar to Dixon's, told me in an email. He and others said instruction focused on teaching a state social studies standard specifying certain content, trying to get kids to memorize the facts, and moving on to the next standard.

“Now that we are building student ability and capacity to grow in their narration, interpretation, explanation, and judgment skills,” he added, “we are able to go much deeper.”

Even the two teachers I spoke with at an elite private school in Manhattan, the Allen-Stevenson School, shared that perception. Ben Neulander and Winnie Barnes, who co-teach sixth grade history, said the curriculum they previously used tried to cover too many topics, sacrificing depth for breadth.

**Students find the approach challenging at first but soon acquire the necessary skills.**

The 4QM curriculum uses routines like creating a storyboard or finishing sentence “stems” about the content with the conjunctions *because*, *but*, and *so* (the latter routine is taken from The Writing Revolution method). While a couple of teachers said the routines can get tedious, they and others saw their value.

“At the beginning of the year,” said Dixon, “it would take them forever to do a storyboard or a *because*, *but*, *so*. Now it’s easier for them and they’re more efficient.” One boy, she said, started the year “always saying, ‘I don’t understand, I need your help.’ Now he’s usually one of the first with an answer, and his writing has improved.”

Tiffany Brandenburg, who teaches at a lab school affiliated with the University of Texas in Tyler, had a similar experience. At the beginning, taking the required notes on texts and trying to understand primary documents for Question Two was a struggle for her students. “Now,” she said, “they know the routine. They don’t complain.”

**Students are more engaged.** Colin Pratt, who teaches eighth graders in Bristol, Connecticut, put it bluntly: “The way I taught before was boring.” This year, he said, his students have enjoyed learning about history through the narratives created by Bassett and Shiffman. “It’s not like reading a history text,” he said. “It’s not as dry. It’s a story.

Brandenburg said her students like retelling the story through storyboards. “It’s probably the most engaged eighth-grade class I’ve had” in six years of teaching history, she said.

**Students are learning more.** Dixon compared her students’ scores on this year’s midyear benchmark state history tests to those of the eighth-grade class at her school last year, when her predecessor wasn’t using 4QM. The Texas tests categorize students by whether they “approach,” “meet,” or “master” grade-level standards. Last year, only 4

percent of students scored in the “meets” category midyear, and none were in “masters.” This year, 30 percent were in “meets” and 18 percent in “masters.”

Brandenburg’s observations were similar, if more anecdotal. “They remember more stuff than my previous classes,” she said. “Like Bacon’s Rebellion. Who remembers Bacon’s Rebellion?”

Waller observed that having students retell the story through note-taking was a powerful way “to build understanding and knowledge, especially for struggling readers.” And both Brandenburg and Pratt noted that the curriculum uses routines grounded in the concept of “retrieval practice.”

Studies have found that the more learners practice retrieving items of information they have in long-term memory but may have slightly forgotten, the more likely they are to be able to recall those items in the future. Creating storyboards, responding to *because/but/so* prompts, taking notes, and answering questions about content covered the previous day are all forms of retrieval practice that are baked into the 4QM curriculum.

### **Students learn to understand primary sources and see multiple points of view.**

Question Two, which focuses on what historical actors were thinking, often requires students to interpret primary sources. Dixon noted that the Texas state history test includes a number of primary sources, and when students took the benchmark test at the beginning of the year they found those documents intimidating. But when they took the test midyear, “they were like, this is easy.”

In addition, several teachers commented that Question Two enables students to understand the perspectives of the authors of those historical documents, even when those perspectives differ from their own. That carries over to the judgment required by Question Four. “You need to know the context before you can judge,” said Barnes. For instance, she said, the sixth graders she teaches were able to see beyond the fact that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves to also “value his contributions.”

When Dixon’s students came to the Question Four for the unit on the American Revolution—“When is violence justified to achieve political change?”—“they were all on the side of the revolutionaries,” she said. “They had to work hard to see the other point of view.” Dixon feels the approach helps students learn “not to make snap judgments.”

**Students learn how to engage in civil disagreement.** For the unit on Writing the Constitution, Question Four is “Should we keep the Electoral College?” Waller and Brandenburg both told me that discussion came on the heels of a polarizing presidential election but nevertheless went remarkably well.

“I told them, it’s not about what I think, it’s what do *you* think?” said Brandenburg. “It showed them we *can* disagree, and that’s okay. They can voice different opinions, but they need to listen.”

Waller said that an administrator who happened to be observing his class that day gave him the highest rating he’d ever received. His class has also had productive discussions about topics like slavery and what’s fair in campaign speech.

“4QM provides a solid framework to base those discussions [on] so that real civil discourse can take place,” he added, “and we can truly learn from one another to help better explain and understand the past. Students are already beginning to see how these skills can help them navigate the tricky issues of the day.”

Despite their disparate settings, all the teachers I spoke with were eager to use the curriculum again. “I’m ready to start it again on day one of next year,” said Dixon. Barnes said her school doesn’t have time to cover the whole curriculum in sixth grade, but she’s passing on the Civil War unit to the seventh-grade history teacher, who begins with that topic. Brandenburg said she wishes there was a 4QM curriculum for the ninth-grade world history class she also teaches.

It's challenging to improve history instruction on a broad scale. Each state has different social studies standards, making it difficult to develop a coherent high-quality curriculum that can be used across the country. But all state standards include US history, usually in eighth grade, making that a logical place to start. And ideally, once teachers see what can be done in that context, a framework like the Four Question Method will trickle up to higher grade levels—and even, perhaps, down to the elementary level, where more history instruction is clearly needed.

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