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Designing a Question-Driven U.S. History Course

Going back a century, most history courses, from middle school through introductory college courses, have been designed primarily to cover a broad swath of history—an approach reinforced by content standards that provide teachers with lengthy lists of facts and concepts they must discuss, often in order to prepare students for standardized exams. Unfortunately, as decades of poor test scores and survey results have demonstrated, this approach has proven ineffective at cultivating long-term learning, much less deep understanding. Worse, it perpetuates misconceptions about what it means to study history. (1)

If the goal of history education is seen mainly as the accumulation of factual and conceptual knowledge about the past, we miss an opportunity to cultivate students' ability to think for themselves about history and its significance. Learning to think critically about the past is not something that should be left to occasional exercises or to advanced courses. Rather, from middle school forward, social studies and history courses should systematically develop students' critical and historical thinking skills. (2) As a result, the facts and concepts that have been the staple of history courses will take on new significance for students. (3)

Questions are the lifeblood of historical thinking, understanding, and research. We practice and expand our discipline when we ask questions about context, perspective, causation, evidence, and significance. One promising way to develop the ability of students at all levels to think like historians is to design courses around questions. Most instructors already pose questions for their students to ponder. But a question-driven course puts meaningful, open-ended questions at the heart of course design in order to drive home to students that their job is not to memorize answers imbibed from the textbook, lectures, and the Internet but rather to develop the ability to read historical sources within a context, weigh various historical interpretations, and even formulate interpretations of their own based upon reasoned analysis of historical evidence. Perhaps most importantly, students will learn to see for themselves the significance of history in their lives both as individuals and as members of society.

Ultimately, designing history courses around questions that help students see the relevance of the past to their worlds of today and tomorrow is a complex pedagogical task. Factors such as administrative support, class size, students' age, and available resources need to be considered carefully—but they should not be deterrents. Current pedagogical research supports the necessity of moving history education beyond the coverage model. (4) Students learn more when they can engage deeply in historical inquiry as opposed to covering broad swaths of history. When instructors guide a more focused inquiry, they prioritize the development of understanding over memorization and create opportunities for students to recognize connections between the present and the past. Furthermore, the question-driven approach invites students to practice the interpretative skills of the historian at a novice level as they articulate and support their responses to open-ended questions whose answers cannot simply be Googled or found boldfaced in the textbook.

Rationale for Question-Driven Course Design

In *Understanding by Design,* pedagogy scholars Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe draw on decades of research to frame a "backward design" process for helping students develop a deep understanding of, rather than shallow familiarity with, course content. "To understand," according to Wiggins and McTighe, is not only to "make connections and bind together our knowledge into something that makes sense of things" but is also "to be able to wisely and effectively *use*—transfer—what we know, in context; to *apply* knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings." (5) Wiggins and McTighe suggest that instructors use "essential questions" as a route to help students develop an understanding of "big ideas"—the conceptual "linchpins" that hold knowledge together. Big ideas cannot be said to have been learned simply because they were defined and memorized. Rather, understanding must be built, and a process of structured inquiry is one of the best tools to enable this deep learning. (6)

One significant advantage of the question-driven approach over the coverage model is that inquiry can help students overcome their misconceptions about the study of history. As education professor Heather Lattimer has noted: "[Students'] opinions are often cast in black and white terms . . . without recognition of the many complex forces that shape individuals and events." (7) This level of simplicity in student thinking may be a consequence of the straightforward lecture and memorization method frequently utilized in social studies and history classrooms. In being asked only to recall and recite the teacher's thinking, rather than examining and constructing their own ideas around open-ended questions, students are denied opportunities to engage in critical thought, analysis, and interpretation. If this method of teaching remains at the forefront of middle school and high school social studies instruction, students will continue to see the learning of history as being primarily the memorization of facts, names, and dates bereft of any clear purpose or meaningful application. Fortunately, as social studies expert Terri Epstein has argued: "By organizing lessons around open-ended questions, rather than definitive texts, teachers can begin to reshape young people's views of the objective and authoritative nature of historical accounts." (8)

Curricular guidelines from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), and the American Historical Association (AHA) also provide indirect support for the question-based approach. For example, the NCSS reminds educators that "acquisition of content" is not the ultimate purpose of social studies education. As noted in the NCSS's 2010 *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and*

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Assessment: "Since social studies has as its primary goal the development of a democratic citizenry, the experiences students have in their social studies classrooms should enable learners to engage in civic discourse and problem solving, and to take informed civic action." (9) By tasking teachers to deliberately select only those standards upon which bigger and more enduring ideas rest, the question-driven course provides a useful methodology for assisting teachers in the management of numerous content standards. Likewise, the design of a question-driven curriculum may also help teachers address the learning outcomes and literacy expectations set forth by the CCSS English Language Arts Standards, which require students in grades 6–12 to be able to articulate and support written arguments, carry out research, and make use of evidence from various textual and multimedia sources—all important skills for the novice historian. The ongoing "Tuning" project of the AHA also offers support for a question-driven approach. This collaborative "effort to describe the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that students develop in [college] history courses and degree programs" emphasizes "core competencies," including the abilities to formulate historical questions, support a historical argument with appropriate evidence, and "explore multiple historical and theoretical viewpoints." Each of these goals is more thoroughly supported by a question-driven course than by a coverage-based course, as the latter typically conveys historical knowledge as relatively settled rather than fundamentally contested. (10)

Implementation

A question-driven course can be structured around authentic, open-ended questions at various levels, ranging from the whole course to major units to individual days of class. Some questions will be overarching, addressing broad sweeps of time and space, while others will be topical, focused on a narrower historical issue. These essential questions can be supplemented with "guiding" questions that are less open-ended and that help direct student inquiry, but the most important questions are sufficiently open to allow students to construct meaning using disciplinary standards of logic and evidence. (11)

Teaching a question-driven course requires guiding students through a process of patient inquiry during which they consider a range of viewpoints and sources. Students need access to adequate contextual information and a variety of sources (primary and secondary) to respond to authentic historical questions. Some of this background information can be provided through conventional means, including textbook reading and lectures, but instructors need to plan class sessions to guide students through an open-ended exploration of sources that convey multiple perspectives. As students engage in this mode of learning about the past, they can also acquire the knowledge that they need to do well on state exams. As educational psychologist Sam Wineburg has argued: "Facts are mastered by engaging students in historical questions that spark their curiosity and make them passionate about seeking answers." (12)

As they undertake in this process, however, instructors and students alike will need to become comfortable with the idea that they are not searching for one correct answer. Essential questions, as Wiggins and McTighe point out, cannot be answered easily and simply. Instructors thus need to work with students to help them build up to formulating qualified, evidence-based responses to complex questions. Students need coaching on how to define their terms, set chronological and spatial boundaries for their responses, and identify the perspectives they need to consider.

Examples from Junior High and High School

At the junior high school level, and even to some extent at the high school level, instructors often teach history within the context of a social studies framework that blends the study of history with the study of general political, civic, and social principles. When combined with a question-driven course design, this model provides an opportunity for the instructor to connect to student interests and perspectives, thus helping learners see the purpose of the history they are studying. The more an essential question can be designed to take into consideration the circumstances of the students' present lives, as well as propel them into investigations of ideas what will clearly endure into their future, the more students will begin to realize and understand the rich benefits of historical inquiry.

Even at the middle school level, the question-driven model can be used to engage students in historical inquiry. For example, Anthony Armstrong has used the question, "When should a government lead its people into military conflict?" to organize a unit for his eighth-grade social studies course. This question has immediate relevance to the students' present lives when one considers America's recent military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Pakistan. The question also lends itself to the type of learning and problem-solving experiences the NCSS recommends students undertake within their middle school and high school social studies classes so that they may better "engage in civic discourse," and "take informed civic action" both in their worlds of today and of tomorrow. In this fourteen-week unit, students examine selected historical events pertaining to George Washington's foreign policy, the War of 1812, America's use of military force during the period of western expansion, and finally, the circumstances that led to military conflict between the North and the South during the Civil War. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1. When should a government led its people into military conflict? Color lithograph by James Montgomery Flagg, 1917. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Table 1. Sample Essential Question, Content Standards, and Assessments for an 8th-Grade Social Studies Unit on Foreign Policy and War.

Essential Question	Content Standards	Formative Assessments	Summative Assessments
When should a government lead its people into military conflict?	Analyze U.S. foreign policy during the early Republic. Examine America's commercial and territorial conquest of the West Analyze the multiple causes, key events, and complex consequences of the Civil War.	Document-Based Questions: – American Foreign Policy (1778–1796) – Manifest Destiny, Indian Removal, War w/ Mexico – Abolition, Wage Slaves, and Slavery – Lincoln, Secession, and the Civil War	Using historical evidence and examples, students present both a written and oral defense of the conditions upon which they believe a government should lead its people into military conflict.

As suggested by Wiggins and McTighe, essential questions within a question-driven course offer a framework for both teachers and students to organize selected content matter and consolidate it around a big idea. The historical content noted above regarding the cautious foreign policy of the Washington administration, the War of 1812, westward expansion, and the Civil War could be used to serve as evidence for students building a case for the conditions upon which they believe a government should lead its people into military conflict. This essential question (and related assessments) requires students to extend their thinking beyond the recall of memorized facts and beyond expressing uninformed opinion. In order to adequately address the essential question, students need to acquire a deeper understanding of the past and be capable of engaging in more sophisticated levels of thinking and reflection. For example, when analyzing the historical content surrounding the reasoning of Presidents Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson for adopting a foreign policy of avoiding warfare with European powers, students will need to contemplate factors such as economic stability and military readiness when determining appropriate conditions for a government leading its people into military conflict. The circumstances surrounding and leading to America's military involvement in the War of 1812 and the American Civil War can provide students recourse for debating the necessity or inevitability of war. And finally, an exploration of the reasoning and use of military force during America's expansion westward will not only highlight the means by which military power can be used to expand influence and maintain progress, but it can also serve as a historical case study in which students reflect upon the axiom, "Might makes right."

Through the use of essential questions, and formative assessments tied to the essential questions, students are provided a means through which they can explore, debate, reflect, and revisit a multitude of plausible answers. An examination of primary and secondary sources related to the historical case studies mentioned above helps students to constantly re-examine their core beliefs and use historical evidence to refine and strengthen their original hypotheses. In the final summative assessment, students defend the circumstances they have selected for determining whether or not a government is justified in leading its people into military conflict. (Table 1.) This carefully defined exercise in constructing foreign policy allows students to prove the depth of their historical understanding, show their skills at effectively analyzing and interpreting the past, and demonstrate themselves capable of partaking in the conversations and actions of an engaged democratic citizenry.

Earlier in his course, Armstrong uses a different essential question to help guide his students through a study of the major events leading up to the Declaration of Independence. The question, "What's the purpose of government?" provides an eight-week framework within which students analyze the political principles found within historical documents such as the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, and the Mayflower Compact. Students also examine political philosophers such as John Locke and take the insight they gain from his political philosophy to better understand the arguments made by Jefferson for the colonies' separation from Great Britain in the Declaration of Independence. In the final summative assessment, students take the political philosophy they have personally constructed in relation to the essential question and write a declaration of independence for another people whom they believe suffer under an unjust government. Through this curriculum design, students not only gain a deeper understanding of the heritage of America's democratic institutions but also begin the process of developing their own ideas about what the purpose and role of government should be in our society both for today and tomorrow. This social studies approach differs from the typical college-level design, but it has the virtue of combining analysis of general principles

Table 2. Sample Essential Questions, Discussions, Assignments, and Exam Prompts for a College-Level Unit on the American Revolution.

Essential Questions	Class Discussion Topics	Formative Writing Assignment Prompts	Exam Prompts
How and to what extent was the American Revolution driven by both republican or democratic principles and material interests?	What was the most fundamental conflict between the English colonies and the imperial government, according to Gordon Wood or Carol Berkin? (In other words, what were the key principles and/or interests at stake?)	How does Carol Berkin's account of the American Revolution differ from Gordon Wood's? What different aspects of the conflict do these authors emphasize?	Critique this statement: The "patriots" fought the American Revolution in order to support the principles of freedom and equality.
How democratic was the founding of the U.S.?	How democratic was the founding of the U.S.? (Students consider multiple perspectives based upon primary documents.)	How did James Madison define Republican government in the Federalist no. 39? To what extent does the form of government that he described fit with modern notions of democracy? How did the actual republican governments of this time fall short of democracy? (Additional sources include Centinel's critique of the proposed Constitution.)	Critique this statement: The U.S. Constitution of 1787 was fundamentally democratic.

(nationalism, warfare, revolution, etc.) with the study of history in a way that reinforces the importance of understanding the past.

Examples from a College-Level Course

Because introductory college-level history courses are not usually accountable to state or national standards for coverage, college instructors often have more latitude to design course units that delve deeply into topics that are viewed as important by scholars and the public alike while also inviting students into an authentic historical inquiry. (13) Take, for example, the American Revolution. In his course on early American history through 1865, David Voelker centers a month-long unit on the American Revolution on a set of big questions dealing with the relative influence of material interests and political principles on the Revolution and the founding of the United States. Through a combination of lecture and class discussion, Voelker guides students through an exploration of significant primary and secondary sources that students can bring to bear on these questions. At the heart of the unit is a comparison of the interpretations of Gordon S. Wood and Carol Berkin (among other historians), who take opposing positions on the fundamental nature of the revolution. Additionally, students read and discuss primary sources that represent different points of view. As seen in Table 2, the readings, formative writing assignments, and discussions all aim at preparing students to respond to historical claims about the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution. (Figure 2.)

The historical claims on the exams are intentionally problematic in order to give students practice analyzing and deploying evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources and perspectives to make arguments. (Table 2). Furthermore, this kind of exam prompt is sufficiently open-ended that students can make varied interpretations and can incorporate evidence from outside of the required class reading, which sometimes encourages students to complete supplemental reading, listening, and viewing assignments. The exam format thus focuses on developing and assessing students' ability to think historically—rather than simply asking them to replicate a "right" answer that has been given to them by the teacher or the textbook. (14)

Voelker uses a similar strategy in an earlier unit of his course to explore the question: How and why did Native Americans of eastern North America lose most of their land? This month-long unit has

Figure 2. "The Looking Glass for 1787. A House Divided against Itself Cannot Stand," by Amos Doolittle, 1787. The debate over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787–1788 provides a ready source for open-ended historical questions. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Figure 3. *Baptism of Pocahontas* by John Gadsby Chapman, in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, 1839–1840. Courtesy Library of Congress.

various components, but it focuses on the interaction of the Powhatan Confederacy and English colonizers during the seventeenth century. Students read and analyze Camilla Townsend's *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma,* in conversation with other scholars and numerous primary documents related to the Virginia Colony in the seventeenth century. They also consider the myth of Pocahontas that became popular in the early nineteenth century, as illustrated in a relief sculpture, a large painting, and a frieze installed in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. They discuss not only how myths about Pocahontas have shaped popular conceptions about seventeenth century colonial history but also the relationship between these myths and the Indian "removal" policies carried out by the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. (Figure 3.)

Conclusion

We know that students of all ages can develop their abilities to interpret different kinds of information, evaluate existing historical accounts and arguments, and craft their own narratives and analyses using multiple sources. To enable this kind of learning, students must come to understand that studying history goes well beyond simply memorizing details about the people, places, and events of bygone eras. Instructors must carefully structure the learning experience to ensure that students are given the opportunity to engage in an authentic process of historical inquiry, analysis, and debate. This goal can be accomplished at the middle school and high school levels by having students utilize history to address open-ended questions about broad social and political issues that they recognize as meaningful both for today and for the future. At the college level, students can delve deeper into the debate among historians on important questions. At all levels, it is important that students not be left with the conclusion that we cannot know anything about the past and that positions about the past are merely subjective options. Instead, the point is for students to learn, as the historian Fritz Fischer has put it, that: "History is the study of questions about the past, not the study of answers about the past." (15) A question-driven course can introduce students to a form of purposeful inquiry that allows them to develop understandings that go well beyond what can simply be Googled—making this approach especially appropriate and relevant for our digital age. ❑

Endnotes

1. On the dismal career of the coverage model, see Sam Wineburg, "Crazy for History," *Journal of American History,* 90 (March 2004), 1401–14; Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History,* 92 (March 2006), 1358–70; Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *Journal of American History,* 97 (March 2011), 1050–66; and Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, "From Learning History to Doing History: Beyond the Coverage Model," in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind,* Regan Gurung, Nancy Chick, and Aeron Haynie, eds. (Sterling, 2008), 19–35.
2. On historical thinking, in addition to the sources cited above, see especially Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001); and Nikki Mandell and

Bobbie Malone, *Thinking like a Historian: Rethinking History Instruction* (Madison, 2008).

3. On the importance of helping students develop the skills needed to carry out meaningful historical inquiry, see Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, 2004), 200.
4. Avishag Reisman, "Reading like a Historian: A Document-Based History Curriculum Intervention in Urban High Schools," *Cognition and Instruction,* 30 (no. 1, 2012), 86–112, esp. 105. For additional studies that support this pedagogy, see Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good,* 203–5.
5. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Upper Saddle River, 2006), 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 66. For a thoughtful and well-documented consideration of the use of "inquiry" in history education, see Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good,* 185–205.
7. Heather Lattimer, "Challenging History: Essential Questions in the Social Studies Classroom," *Social Education,* 72 (Oct. 2008), 326–29, esp. 327.
8. Terrie Epstein, "Preparing History Teachers to Develop Young People's Historical Thinking," *Perspectives on History* (May 2012), http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2012/1205/.
9. Michelle M. Herczog, "Using the NCSS 'National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment' to Meet State Social Studies Standards," *Social Education,* 74 (no. 4, 2010), 217–22, esp. 222.
10. "History Discipline Core: A Statement from the AHA's Tuning Project," *Perspectives on History* (Oct. 2012), 42–43.
11. For a helpful discussion of different kinds of questions, see Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design,* 116–17. For helpful advice on creating "driving questions," along with a model for building inquiry-based courses, see Thom Markham, John Larmer, and Jason Ravitz, *Project Based Learning Handbook: A Guide to Standards-Focused Project Based Learning for Middle and High School Teachers* (Novato, 2003), 37–39. For a lengthy list of possible essential questions for American history, see John McNamara, "Essential Questions in Teaching American History," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/resources/essential-questions-teaching-american-history.
12. Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York, 2011), 115–18.
13. Calder, "Uncoverage"; Sipress and Voelker, "End of the History Survey."
14. David J. Voelker, "Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy," *History Teacher,* 41 (Aug. 2008), 505–18.
15. Fritz Fischer, "The Historian as Translator: Historical Thinking, the Rosetta Stone of History Education," *Historically Speaking,* 12 (June 2011), 15–17, esp. 16.

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