

Making History Mine

Meaningful Connections for Grades 5–9

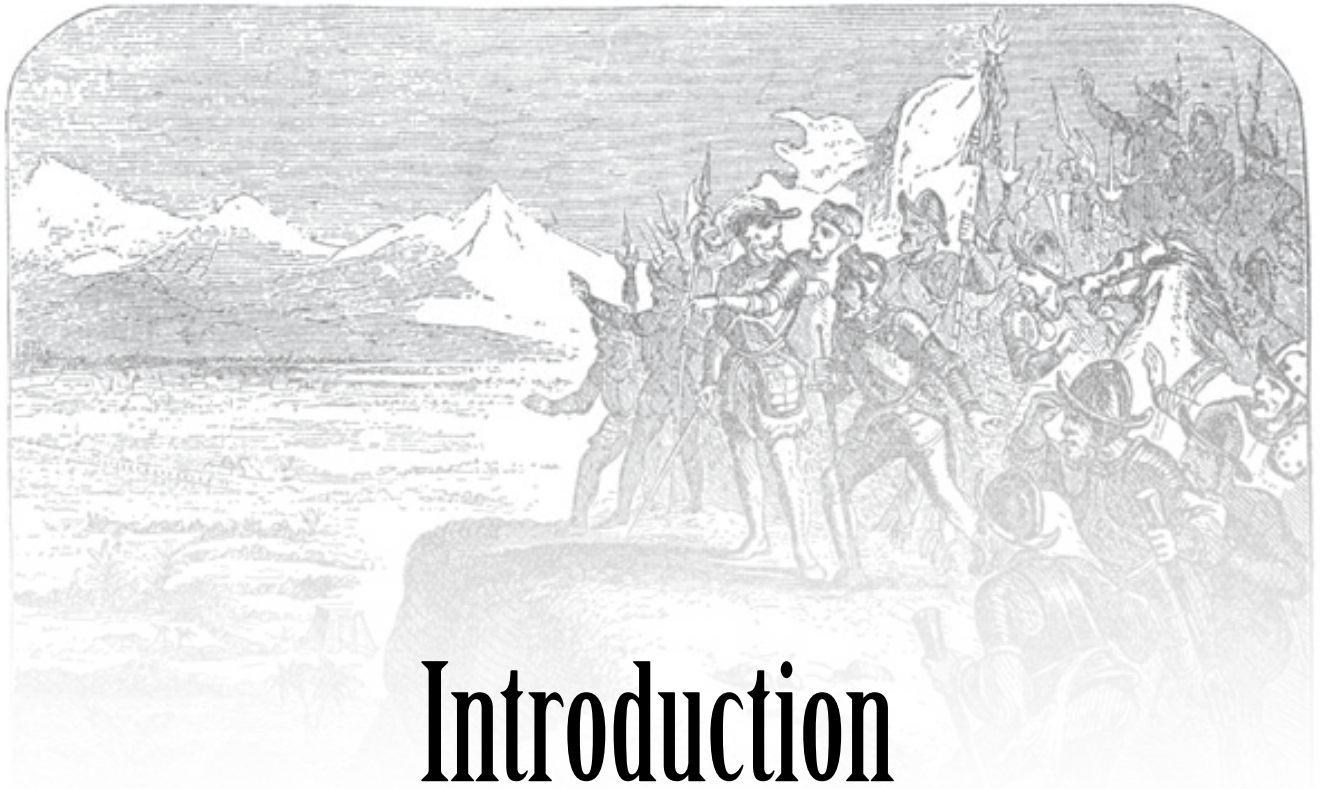
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Introduction

At the end of every year, like so many history teachers, I regret simply skimming the surface of the past. Three weeks, and there went India. We spent half a day on Emperor Ashoka, and I completely glossed over the Mauryan Empire. Should I have devoted more time to Andrew Jackson and less to Abraham Lincoln? And how can my students possibly go through their teenage years, let alone adulthood, without fully processing the achievements of women such as Jane Addams and Hildegard of Bingen?

I think I've perfected the "oh well" half smile and apologetic shoulder shrug in response to my students' desire to dive deeper into history.

"Will we get to the Byzantine Empire this year? We never get to the Byzantine Empire," says Jackson, an especially eager ninth grader who is looking at the world history syllabus with mild skepticism.

"We will, for a couple of days in March," I say, smiling and shrugging, mentally robbing Rome to pay Constantinople. Maybe we could carve out one class period to create mosaics that imitate the stags and ostriches of Byzantine art.

Another year, in an eighth-grade U.S. history class, Gianna asks, "How does Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party relate to politics today?"

What a great question—and what a thoughtful invitation to veer from my lesson plan on Hamilton and Jefferson. My students need to know the history of American political parties, but they also need to make relevant connections to contemporary issues. Our weekly current events

discussions only hint at the intricacies of today's government. Could I squeeze in a modern-day political debate at the end of the Early Republic unit?

As we discuss modern political systems in a seventh-grade global cultures class, Camilla wonders why Communism was so appealing, anyway. This I can answer succinctly—"Wouldn't you like everything to be equal, at least in theory?"—before moving back to our conversation comparing capitalism, Communism, and fascism. But when I catch my breath after school that day, I kick myself for giving so little time to such a grand question. Maybe we could do a ten-minute simulation of what it might be like to live in a land where the government gives everyone a job and an income.

The bane of the history teacher's existence is coverage. The middle grades social studies curriculum is invariably a mile wide and an inch deep, making it difficult to do justice to the subject and to our students. So we trudge on, moving like exhausted soldiers determined to keep up with the general's plan for advancement. We are dedicated, but many of us wonder if there is a better way. Can we tap into our students' curiosity about the world around them without dulling their senses through content overload? Can we probe more of the mysteries and miseries of global cultures and still prime our students' passion for activism and their hope for the future? Yes, we can. The solution, I believe, lies in the search for meaning through personal connections to history.

Goals: Finding a Personal Connection

Four years into teaching middle school world and U.S. history, influenced by the ideas of *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins and McTighe 2001), I started asking myself at the beginning of a chapter: what do I want my students to know and be able to do with this information? Such a big-picture approach helped me create more meaningful assignments that generated measurable knowledge. Instead of just putting together interesting bits of material, I began to understand how to visualize the beginning, middle, and end of a unit.

After several years of these small steps, I felt comfortable expanding this emphasis on specific goals to an entire course, asking myself two guiding questions: (1) who are my students now? and (2) what do they need to learn to become conscientious and knowledgeable adults?

Who Are My Students Now?

In all teaching, but especially in the identity-forming crucible of middle school, the student is as important as the material; human development parallels academic development. Middle-schoolers focus on themselves, wanting to know how their studies relate to their lives. Passionate people, they want to harness their enthusiasm to change the world for the better. They crave movement and physical expressions of learning. Joyful and humorous human beings, they pride themselves on seeing the fun in most any situation. Like all of us, they want to feel appreciated and competent and

useful. The history we teach reaches them best when it involves novelty, humor, meaning, a sense of self, and a connection to the real world.

What Do They Need to Learn to Become Conscientious and Knowledgeable Adults?

The vast majority of our students will not become professional historians. In their careers, however, they will need to know how to find valid information, analyze it from multiple perspectives, and communicate it clearly. In a world that *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman reminds us is increasingly “flat” (Friedman 2006), our students also will need to distinguish themselves with creative approaches and critical thinking. Such abilities stretch far beyond traditional expectations of memorization and regurgitation. Students will need qualities that business writer Daniel Pink calls *symphony*, “putting the pieces together” so they encompass more than the sum of their parts; *story*, crafting tales that influence people; *empathy*, sensing what others are feeling; and *meaning*, connecting to deeper values that underlie our everyday lives (Pink 2006, 66–67).

When working with students who may not immediately see the value in becoming historians, how can we guide them toward exciting discoveries and meaningful relationships while still focusing on academic standards and curricular mandates? The best answer I’ve found is to teach under the shelter of broad themes and global concepts, conveying ideas that connect content across topics and grade levels. With this approach, students are not focusing on the tiny details of history, although facts remain crucial to effective argumentation. Instead, adolescents see history through the eyes of individuals and then move outward to larger implications and patterns. One of the best places to begin is with the personal, for who isn’t interested in learning why and how we have come to live as we do?

Starting with the Standards

All of the chapters are rooted in state and national standards, and detailed descriptions of those links open each section of the book. Here I want to emphasize the larger goals of teaching middle school history.

1. The Role of the Individual: Assessing Who Makes History

I begin my history classes each year by telling students, “You will *all* make history.” Focusing on notable individuals of the past helps students envision how they, too, can influence the future and use their burgeoning power effectively. Such strategies personalize the content.

2. How Opinions Become History: Analyzing Point of View

Recognizing point of view can be as simple as flipping through an eighth grader's diary entry or as complex as deciphering a New Deal historian's sanitized treatment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. By examining a variety of primary and secondary sources, including textbooks, students can understand the motives of historical and contemporary people. Considering perspective also helps students come to terms with the complexities of history: nothing is as simple as the textbook might have you believe.

3. Fighting Words: Examining Rhetoric, Reasoning, and the Role of Language in History

History comes alive most vividly through the words of people who lived it. Writing is a source of inspiration and power. By inspecting speeches, letters, and diaries, students can explore the power of literature to move people—not to mention their own ability to effect change through a letter to the editor or a political poster. Fictional sources also can engage students' emotions and encourage intuitive leaps.

4. A Broader View: Finding Patterns in the Past

After students have examined personal connections, point of view, and the role of language in history, they can move beyond an individual's scope to the wider blueprints of the past. This category evokes more traditional history teaching about chronology, geography, government, and economics. However, starting with a personal reference and then expanding the discussion, such as presenting Theodora's speech to Justinian during the Nika rebellion before investigating Byzantine politics, can help students understand global relationships on an approachable scale. They can ask themselves, where do my ancestors and I fit into these patterns?

5. How Historians Think: Writing as a Way of Understanding

Students can examine and further understand what they think about history by pulling together their ideas into analytical paragraphs and essays. Such high-level synthesis goes to the core of what real historians do: examine primary sources and make a case for a point of view.

6. Current Events: Connecting Past to Present

With a foundational knowledge of analytical writing and the broad patterns that link historical events, students can compare the past to the present in greater depth. Teachers can build students'

understanding by forging strong, personal ties to the curriculum. Individuals and institutions intertwine: just as students' grandparents affect their lives, society's past actions shape today's domestic and foreign policies.

7. The Power of Information: Igniting Passion Through Research

We can plant the seeds of historical research early on in a course, such as when we ask students to consult biographical sources to understand the motivations of historical figures. Later, after students have integrated the first six goals of *Making History Mine* into their mental framework, we can introduce more expansive projects. Guided, independent research helps students become creators of knowledge, not simply receivers or manipulators of information, and shows them how to explore the world and their potential role in shaping it.

8. Global Citizenship: Learning to Evaluate Ethics and Solve Problems

Moving from the individual's role in history, as defined in Chapter 1, we can show our middle-schoolers how to use this knowledge to take action. Encouraging students to direct their passions toward civic activism is the essence of character development. It gives young adolescents a chance to make their own history.

History at all levels and in all units poses moral questions to students. Sometimes such inquiries can kick off a chapter in the textbook or the school year, while at other times these dilemmas require students to plunge into additional research. This final goal strives to foster engaged citizens who are ready to lead and equipped to direct their newfound skills toward local, national, and global change.

Planning the Sequence: Where Do I Start?

History in the middle grades often throws too many ingredients into the soup. Depending on the particular state standards involved, teachers may be expected to address ancient, medieval, and modern world history; early and modern U.S. history; geography; current events; economics; and often state history as well. Mindful of this potential hodgepodge, I've structured *Making History Mine* to show you how to use these goals and lessons within any secondary grade span or subject. It might seem confusing to change topics frequently, such as when I mention the cattle herds of Theodore Roosevelt in the same chapter as the sculptures of China's Zhou dynasty, but I want to make these ideas appealing and applicable to all levels and all subjects.

Many of this book's goals are recursive: they come back again and again within a particular unit and throughout the year. I've often found it a good rule of thumb to begin with the first three goals, focusing on the individual, before building up to the larger patterns and connections of the last

five themes. Introductory hooks at the beginning of a lesson or a unit will grab students' attention because of the personal relationships established. However, a unit will work just as well if we start with the big ideas, such as geography or chronology, and then zoom in toward the people affected by these larger trends. Much depends on your students: their background knowledge, their attention span, their interests, and their skills.

In the past decade, I have taught both middle school and high school classes, from geography and current events to world and U.S. history. I've used the lessons and strategies mentioned throughout the book at all levels, including the time-crunched space of an AP U.S. history class. Appealing to skills-based and identity-related standards can work for any student in any grade. Every year I try to learn more and reach more students. Thank you for coming on this journey with me.