

The Many and the One project-Andy Marchal

I teach 7th grade U.S. History at Metairie Park Country Day School, just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana. Metairie Park Country Day is a Pre-K through 12th grade private, coeducational private school, with an enrolment of approximately 650 students. Country Day is non-sectarian, and strives to be a diverse, inclusive learning community. As stated in the school's mission statement, "The School's mission is to prepare its students to excel in higher education and to succeed in a rapidly changing and culturally diverse world. Country Day's cooperative learning environment encourages individual achievement, and fosters critical thinking, curiosity, creativity, and a love of learning for its own sake."

The Lower School at Country Day is a unique place. For much of Lower School, students are placed in Multi-Grade classrooms. Kindergarteners, 1st graders and 2nd graders are all placed in the same classroom. Likewise, grades 3 and 4 are grouped together. Students have the same teacher as they move between grades, and work on individualized curriculum, designed so that each student can work at their own pace. As a result, students do not have much experience working with traditional textbooks by the time they get to Middle School.

The Middle School at Country Day, consisting of grades 6, 7 and 8, has class sizes of 15 or so students. The 6th grade History curriculum covers the founding of the colonies through the American Revolution. Because the students have so little experience with textbooks, our 6th grade teacher has made it a focus of her class to teach the students how to effectively read and use a textbook. While it is important that students learn to effectively utilize a textbook, this focus on the textbook means that many groups are left out.

In 7th grade, I pick up where they left off the previous year, and cover American History through the Civil War. In my course, I strive to bring in sources and voices from outside the textbook. Our textbook, *Holt Social Studies United States History: Beginnings to 1877*, is basically a book about the political history. By and large, the book is about the political ruling class, with a smattering of mentions of women, African Americans and the non-wealthy. Because such short shrift is given to a majority of the people living in the country at the time, I try to give my students a better picture of what the country was actually like.

If my students have a better grasp on race, religion and society in general, the events that unfold throughout the course of the year will make more sense to them. Nat Turner will no longer be a crazy person who thought God told him to kill a bunch of whites. With the proper background and context, my students will have a better understanding of the complexities that the study of Nat Turner present.

There are a host of other topics that would make more sense to my students with a better understanding of race and religion. While the textbook has a paragraph on the Second Great Awakening, this paragraph by no means gives the students a clear picture of how religion helped to spawn the many reform movements in the United States during the pre-Civil War period.

Likewise, I have realized that it is not accurate to present abolitionism and the Civil War as the textbook presents them. There is almost no mention of the role of religion in the textbook in regards to either of these.

Speaking of textbooks, the institute has also caused me to move further and further away from using the textbook as a primary resource. The longer I teach, the more I realize that textbooks are inadequate for giving students a true picture of what happened in the past. If I want my students to truly understand the past and its significance then I need to make an even greater effort to bring in primary sources and perspectives other than those presented in the text.

Justifying why I need to include more information on race and religion in my History classes is the easy part. Putting it into practice is more difficult. By adding to my curriculum, that necessitates taking things out, and those can be difficult decisions to make.

This Institute has caused me to rethink the way I teach my 7th grade US History class. I have decided to include the issues of race, religion, gender and class in two ways. First, instead of just jumping in where they left off in 6th grade, I have realized that they need much more background on the social structure of the United States at the time. Instead of starting with the Articles of Confederation, as I've done in the past, I need to start with a sort of primer on race, religion, class and gender in the United States in the 18th century. With the Institute fresh in my mind, the primary focus this year will be race and religion, but as I move forward, I will include more about class and gender.

Secondly, I will work to include discussions of race, religion, class and gender throughout the curriculum. My students will be able to see the impact that these topics had on the political and social history of the United States. For example, the War of 1812 is much more interesting when my students learn how people of all different races came together to fight the British in the Battle of New Orleans. A discussion of Manifest Destiny is incomplete without discussing these topics. The interplay between race, religion, class and gender is essential to talking about Westward migration. By avoiding the simple answers and top-down approach that the textbook utilizes in explaining American History, my students will be able to gain a more complete understanding of our country.

During the primer, I will begin with a present day discussion on race and religion. Using the information from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and The Association of Religious Data Archives, I will try to give my students a picture of the role religion plays in contemporary society. I didn't have an accurate understanding of this role prior to attending the institute, and I'm certain that my students don't either. I will also begin my discussion of race with the information I gained from Sylvester Johnson. Using information from his presentation, as well as information from the websites *Race-Are We So Different?* and *RACE - The Power of an Idea* I will show my students that race is indeed a social construct, and that people have much more in common, genetically speaking, than they have differences.

Once we've established the current state of religion, or at least have some idea of how those two ideas impact American society today, we will move back into the 18th century to look at the role of religion and race at the founding of the country. For the religion piece of this, I will rely heavily on the *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* website. In addition, I will utilize primary sources, and allow the Founders to speak for themselves on the subject of religion. In terms of race, the websites *Africans in America* and *Slavery and the Making of America* are excellent

resources. Combining an interesting narrative, as well as a mix of primary sources, these websites will give my students a better insight into the subject of race in the 18th century.

Resources:

Religion

Statistics on Religion in America Report -- Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life
<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

Religion and the Founding of the American Republic (Library of Congress Exhibition)
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/>

The Association of Religion Data Archives <http://www.thearda.com/>

God In America - Coming October 11, 12, & 13, 2010 | PBS
<http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/>

Race

RACE - Are We So Different? :: A Project of the American Anthropological Association
<http://www.understandingrace.org/home.html>

RACE - The Power of an Illusion | PBS http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm

Slavery and the Making of America | PBS <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/>

Africans in America <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>