

*2010 Gilder Lehrman Vermont History Teacher of the Year*

**John Peterson's Philosophy of Teaching American History**



Recently I concluded one of my classes by setting up an assignment where students had to select a significant figure from the 1920s or 30s and eventually present that character to the class by first-person role-playing. I was honestly expecting groans from my students.

Instead, when the bell rang, I was suddenly swamped by a crowd of students, each eager to research a personality from the list I had just given them. I could not have been happier.

When I teach American history my goal is to get my students to make a genuine personal connection with the subject that both enlightens and informs their own lives.

As each one enthusiastically tried to get my attention I felt that this assignment was going to do just that. The class this

happened in, *American Voices*, is a new class that I recently started with an English teacher colleague.

For years we had been lobbying for this class and finally developments at the state Department of Education level made the offering attractive to our local administrators. This required no paradigm shift for me. My own undergraduate background is in "American Civilization," called "American Studies" on most campuses.

I have described it to non-historians as an anthropological or cultural approach to American history that I felt did a better job of taking in the broader sweep of our story as Americans. Titling the course *American Voices* was a deliberate nod to the fact that we planned on using primary sources heavily in our new curriculum.

My colleague and I both wanted to go right to the people who made America rather than depend on a recently written textbook. With my students I strive to narrow the gap between the past and present. This happens much more effectively when primary source texts, images and artifacts – the "stuff" of history – are put right in their hands.

While I have been able to do this for years with my Advanced Placement US History and college students it has been a thrill for me to teach a class to a broad range of students that has been liberated from textbook dependence. It has been a successful endeavor. Earlier in the year when we were reading excerpts from native American speeches one student gushed, "This is so much better than reading a book! Why don't all teachers do this?"

As a reaction to the compartmentalization and specialization of history that was taking place some leading historians began to talk about the "tapestry of American history" about twenty years ago. That discussion struck a chord in me that continues to resonate. I want to convey that tapestry to my students, the big picture, yet I want them to know that it is made up of many rich and varied threads, of which each of them is one.

Although we will not come away knowing the individual names and stories of each one of those threads I want my students to come away knowing, "History makes you realize what you do matters."

*John Peterson*