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Teaching America's Past to Our Newest Americans: Immigrant Students and United States History

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At one high school outside of Boston, most students look forward to their daily American history class. They love their teacher's regular pop culture references and arrive ready to participate in the lively and contentious debates. Yet, despite Almira's fondness for the teacher and deep commitment to academic success, this class causes her more apprehension than any other. While Almira is able to use diligence and academic skills to bridge her English language gaps in other subject areas, American history is a particular struggle. Her lack of context for learning, or perhaps her lack of cultural understanding about the past of her adopted nation, including unfamiliar names, places, and events, makes completing class readings and following discussion far more challenging for her than it is for her American-born peers. Despite the efforts of an enthusiastic and engaging teacher, Almira feels overwhelmed and resentful about the time she must devote just to tread water in her history class. She looks forward to the end of the year, when she will have completed her American history graduation requirement and can move onto other, more accessible, coursework.

How can we help immigrant students, like Almira, have a more positive experience in their study of United States history? We began to examine this problem by talking to our immigrant students themselves, many of whom were non-native English speakers, at two large, diverse public high schools outside of Boston. Our sample group of immigrant students, including both "reluctant learners" and college-bound high-achievers, all indicated that studying U.S. history had been a struggle. Risa, an immigrant from Sweden, mentioned that although she had studied English extensively prior to moving to the United States, she heard many words in her American history class that she did not know. She also resented the great amount of details that students were expected to learn, quite different from the "big concepts" that were emphasized in her home country. Bo, an immigrant from China, found the large number of unfamiliar proper names in his American history class daunting. Fernando, an Advanced Placement-level student from Brazil, felt handicapped by his lack of background knowledge in U.S. history, commenting, "When most students were [already] aware of conflicts and significant events in our history, I was being exposed to them for the first time." Other immigrant students noted dissatisfaction with the curricular content of their American history course and its relevance to their lives or experiences. While many students provided positive comments about their experiences in U.S. history courses, even the most well prepared immigrant students expressed struggles. As a result, we (two public high school history educators) decided to search for ways to make U.S. history more engaging and accessible to the growing population of immigrant students.

The last two decades have been a period of significant immigration to the United States. There are now 38 million foreign-born residents here.[1] Almost half of all public school teachers have at least one English Language Learner (ELL) and nearly 10 percent of the total public school enrollment is comprised of students with limited English proficiency.[2] Traditionally, immigration has been centered on a handful of states, including California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey. Yet over the last two decades, "foreign-born population grew substantially faster in states that have not traditionally received large numbers of immigrants,"[3] particularly in the Southeast, Mountain, and Plains states. Furthermore, in many metropolitan areas, there are now more immigrants living in the suburbs than the cities.[4] As immigration increases in areas that are not traditional hubs for immigrants, more teachers, administrators, and school communities need preparation on how best to serve students who

Dressed as Angelo Romano from Italy, Chloe Fedorov, 11, (center) joins a throng of huddled masses waiting in line at an Ellis Island immigration simulation that gave sixth grade students at Roosevelt Middle School in Eugene, Oregon, a hands on history lesson, Nov. 20, 2012.

(AP Photo/The Register-Guard, Chris Pietsch)

are immigrants or children of immigrants.

As our immigrant student populations are increasing, the United States has also been increasing its emphasis on American history. Over the last two decades, almost half of all states adopted their own history/social studies assessments and many of these exams had a focus on U.S. history.[5] In Massachusetts, where we teach, the social studies curriculum was revised after 9/11 to include a greater emphasis on American history, and a state law mandates that all high school graduates must have completed a course in U.S. history. Although No Child Left Behind did not include any mandates related to history/social studies curriculum or assessment, it did include funding for the Teaching American History grant program. There is a clear expectation from state and national policymakers that teachers will teach more American history. We situate this discussion about teaching immigrant students U.S. history within two competing issues, the increasing numbers of immigrant students and the increased emphasis on U.S. history, which is often a state-mandated graduation requirement.

Understanding Immigrant Students

With these changing classroom demographics, it is crucial that history teachers acknowledge and understand the diversity within their immigrant student population. We have noticed certain differences among our immigrant students that should be considered when teachers make curricular and instructional decisions.

First, there are often drastic educational differences among immigrant students, making it ineffective to generalize about their needs. Where some immigrants may have been well educated in their previous country, other immigrants may have had little formal education. For example, in one of our classrooms, we taught a Colombian student who had attended an exclusive private elementary school in Bogotá and a Haitian student who had only started his formal education a few years prior to immigrating to the United States in middle school.

Second, some immigrant children may arrive already proficient in English, where others are just learning the language. Some of our students come from former British colonies, and while they may also speak an indigenous language, they learned English in school. Other students arrive only knowing a few words in English.

Third, there are important cultural differences between immigrant groups. Often teachers have misconceptions that students from the same ethnic or racial group share similar experiences. Yet, there are often major economic divisions between immigrant populations from the same region or country. For example, there is a wide spectrum

Tips for Teaching U.S. History to Immigrant Students and English Language Learners

- Prior Knowledge: Do not assume that immigrant students have a similar level of prior knowledge about U.S. history and civics as their native-born peers. First, elicit the students' background knowledge. Then, use it as a starting point to address the gaps in the students' understanding and build on their preconceptions.
- Preview and Review: Be sure to preview and review readings with English language learners. If they have been exposed to key vocabulary and concepts in advance, they will be better able to access the class material. They will also benefit from reinforcement of those same key vocabulary and concepts at the completion of a lesson.
- Instructions and Expectations: Ensure that all of your assignment instructions and expectations are clear. Make sure the directions cannot be misinterpreted or misunderstood by your immigrant students and English language learners. Consider preparing a unit overview guide at the beginning of each unit that includes 15–20 names and terms and 3–4 essential questions. Emphasize and revisit these names and terms with your students throughout the unit.
- Thinking Time: Allow students time to write down their thoughts individually, before engaging in a whole class discussion. Allowing time to brainstorm may help the more reluctant class participants, especially those students concerned about their speaking skills, to participate more in class.
- Peer Support: Provide ample opportunities for students to discuss concepts and questions in small groups or partners. It is helpful for English language learners to use peers, especially peers with similar language abilities and backgrounds, to access material that may be challenging. A level of teamwork can add the needed security for immigrant students to take academic risks in the classroom.
- Teacher Support: Actively seek out, encourage, and support participation from immigrant students in class discussions and look for opportunities for them to share personal experience and expertise. Greet new arrivals by name and routinely talk to them before and after class about their interests and background. Make yourself accessible and approachable to English language learners, who may need to access extra help after school in order to succeed in your U.S. history course.
- Empathy and Perspective: Consider the perspectives of and maintain empathy for your students. How much do you know about the history and government of Poland? Brazil? Nepal? Honduras? It is likely that high school students who are recent arrivals to the United States know even less about this nation's past and its governance. Try to imagine being a new student in one of the countries your students are from, with a different language, history, politics, and culture. How would you want your teacher to help you? Attempt to see the world through their perspective as immigrants and English language learners. Reserve judgment and embrace teachable moments.
- Connect Familiar to Unfamiliar: Use "Do Now" or journal questions to help immigrant students connect the familiar to the unfamiliar. Connect the content of U.S. history to the current day lives of your students. For example, start a class on the 4th Amendment of the Bill of Rights by asking students if they have ever had to walk through a metal detector or been through the screening process at an airport. What happened? How did they feel about it? Make a connection to the broad and ongoing tension between a need for greater security and the protection of personal liberties. Ask the students why they think the founding fathers wanted to protect citizens against unjust search and seizure and have them assess if the U.S. government lives up to those principles today.

of educational and socioeconomic differences among East Asian immigrants in the United States. In our own classrooms, it is equally likely that a new arrival from China has a parent who is a high-tech executive as it is that the student has a parent who is a low-wage restaurant worker.

All of these immigrant students bring significant cultural capital to the classroom from their nations of origin, including national and family histories, primary language skills, and cross-cultural awareness. Immigrant students may offer important alternatives to the traditional portrayal of U.S. history based on what they have learned outside the United States or from the cultural stories their families tell. These students should be viewed as adding to the richness of a classroom experience for all students studying U.S. history. If they feel comfortable and welcomed in the classroom environment, immigrant students can provide first-hand experiences and varied perspectives that can enrich and expand the learning about the United States' complex past.

Strategies for English Language Learners

Since the vast majority of immigrant students to the United States are ELLs, teachers of U.S. history need to be attentive to the special needs of this population. As such, effective history teachers should tailor their instruction not only to the development of immigrant students' content knowledge, but also their skills acquisition. The successful American history teacher of non-native English speaking students should respond to "four main areas of concern: (1) building empathy for the difficulties associated with learning a language; (2) understanding how second languages are acquired; (3) adapting curricula to students' language needs; and (4) employing literacy skills in the disciplines."[6] To be an effective teacher, an instructor must not only be knowledgeable about the subject area, but also about his or her students. The secondary-level U.S. history teacher should know which of his or her students are English language learners, their levels of proficiency, and their countries of origin. He or she must plan instruction

that meets the students' dual needs of learning content and improving their academic English.

Teachers needs to acknowledge that while history instruction in the United States emphasizes group work, analysis, and discussion, many immigrant students come from cultures where rote learning and direct instruction are the norm.[7] However, cooperative learning can be effectively used with ELL students through purposeful grouping, maintaining mutual respect, and using activities that require students to understand one concept in depth and then share that concept with others.[8] A concrete strategy would be to allow for two minutes of small group discussion of a question before asking for students to share opinions with the class. The time to consult with peers can shore up an ELL student's confidence, and gives them an opportunity to ask for clarification of an unfamiliar concept or term before a whole-class discussion takes place. In a U.S. history classroom that one of us recently observed, students in the class hailing from Morocco, Algeria, and Haiti were able to use this two minutes of "consulting" time in groups, and some rudimentary French, to discuss and gain clarity on the meaning of a phrase that they had encountered in a reading. For examples of further strategies, we recommend the NCSS publication *Passport to Learning: Teaching Social Studies to ESL Students* (Bárbara C. Cruz et al).

One specific strategy for teaching ELL students is "beginning with the familiar."[9] In applying this concept to the U.S. history classroom, a teacher could start a unit of study with a hook that allows students to build confidence by writing about, examining, or discussing something relevant to their own personal experience. For example, in a lesson on the Boston Tea Party, a teacher could ask students to list countries where certain drinks, including tea, have cultural importance. This could lead to examination of the emotions that Bostonians and other colonists felt about British restrictions on their power to trade freely, including the culturally important drink of tea. ELL students would be better able to access the important concepts being taught by making connections to their own experiences and lives, and apply familiar understandings to a previously unfamiliar event in history.

Immigrant students often experience their greatest hurdles not within the history classroom, but in completing the assigned textbook or other academic readings at home. A teacher should preview any assigned readings, and spend class time explaining new vocabulary or terms that will appear in an at-home reading, including idioms such as a "house divided," the "home front" or "Old Glory."[10] While immigrant students may be familiar with all of these individual words, they may not realize that they are reading a culturally bounded phrase unless the teacher has explained it. Ensuring that every student has both a student-friendly English language dictionary and a translation dictionary that allows them to read definitions of English words in their home language is essential to successful completion of assigned readings.

Conclusion

Let's return to Almira, from the beginning of this article, our motivated but frustrated recent immigrant struggling in an American history class. How can Almira's teacher help her both succeed in her U.S. history course and enjoy learning about the topic? For starters, the teacher must learn about Almira. Where is she from? How can the content of the course connect to her own family's culture? How can her experiences as an immigrant be embraced as an asset, not a deficit, in the classroom? The teacher must also adjust his or her pedagogical approach. He or she must embed literacy instruction in his history curriculum and give explicit instruction during class to help students unfamiliar with the interactive nature of the American classroom. The teacher should build connections to concepts and ideas that students are familiar with in their own personal experience to enable understanding of difficult concepts. Most of all, the teacher should let Almira know that he or she welcomes Almira's fresh and unique viewpoint and believes that she is here to make our country's future as rich as its past.

Notes

1. Pew Hispanic Center, "Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2008" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), pewhispanic.org/factsheets/factsheet.php?FactsheetID=59.
2. Bárbara C. Cruz, Joyce W. Nutta, Jason O'Brien, Carine M. Feyten, and Jane M. Govoni, *Passport to Learning: Teaching Social Studies to ESL Students* (Silver Springs, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2003), 3.
3. Jeffrey S. Passel and Wendy Zimmerman, *Are Immigrants Leaving California? Settlement Patterns of Immigrants in the Late 1990s* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2001), 1.
4. Audrey Singer, *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2004), 1.
5. Bruce A. VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 182.
6. Thomas Misco and Martha E. Castañeda, "'Now, What Should I Do for English Language Learners?' Reconceptualizing Social Studies Curriculum Design for ELLs," *Educational Horizons* 87, no. 3 (2009): 182-89.
7. Jodi Reiss, *102 Content Strategies for English Language Learners* (Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008), 20; Cruz, Nutta, O'Brien, Feyten, and Govoni, 12-14.
8. Ibid., 27-28.
9. Misco and Castañeda, "'Now, What Should I Do for English Language Learners?'", 186.
10. Reiss, 99.

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