



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

LEARNING THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

How can teachers get students interested in events that took place hundreds or thousands of years ago? What do the events of the past have to do with our students' current lives? This is one of the obstacles confronted by instructors of history, humanities, art history, and other subjects that make reference to the past. Students feel enormous pressure to maximize their college experiences. Who can blame them—college is expensive, time consuming, and hard work. Students want to know that the subjects they study and pay for will help them get a job.

We want our students to love history the way we do. We want the past to come alive, but we don't want to overwhelm our students with details they won't remember. We want our students to form a method for collecting, interpreting, and applying the lessons of history. We want them to understand how past decisions have current consequences. So we focus our pedagogy on providing a context for historical themes and on teaching the methodology of finding and interpreting details. For example, one of the themes we explore when teaching about the Roman Empire is authority. Authority was critical to controlling masses of people, and the Romans found creative ways to exert their authority, including the creation of imposing buildings used to conduct government business. In the process, they created a standard of architecture recognized around the world for communicating strength and power. Roman architecture is the choice when banks, schools, and governments want to symbolize authority. Providing a contemporary context when studying ancient architecture helps students understand that current choices are often rooted in experiences of the past.

Our instruction also focuses on the values and characteristics we've inherited and why history can provide us with valuable tools for making decisions today and into the future. For example, a focus on Roman history can provide a reference for understanding modern problems like securing borders, achieving

an organized, disciplined government, and the importance of family life—the list goes on and on. It can also help students understand how we have inherited powerful words like “senator,” “veto,” and “empire,” and what consequences these words have had on modern life.

To help students discover the applicability of past events, we have created student-centered exercises with these clearly defined objectives:

- Identify the key characteristics or values of a society.
- Engage students in multifaceted, multi-disciplinary learning.
- Encourage cooperation and team building.
- Show the relevance of the past to the future.
- Learn a methodology for finding and interpreting history.

In addition to achieving these objectives, student-centered exercises have a number of instructional advantages; they

- Reinforce patterns so students can anticipate what will be stressed in class
- Provide a guide or plan for recognizing key ideas, concepts, people, etc. in assigned readings
- Are appropriate for traditional settings, hybrid instruction or online courses
- Provide a structure to create lesson plans
- Show how different patterns for learning can be created.

The framework for these exercises is endlessly flexible and can be used when introducing any new culture or changing paradigm. For example, it can be used to compare the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, compare a western and non-western culture, or articulate the transition at the end of the nineteenth century, brought about by changes in science.

When designing an exercise, it is important to be clear about what the students should learn. A clear focus on the desired outcome will help guide their questions and direct their conclusions. What follows is an example of how to create an exercise on Rome, but it can be altered to accommodate any subject and objectives.

We ask our students to imagine the following: *You*



represent Rome at a world civilization competition convened by the Humanities Teachers of the World (HTW). Your task is to convince the Board of Governors of the HTW that Roman culture was the greatest on earth.

To accomplish this goal, it is important to start with a discussion about the meaning of the “greatest culture on earth.” For instance, does “greatest” mean most innovative, best use of aesthetics, most skillful at adapting ideas, or the greatest use of technology? This discussion will help students explore important themes of the Roman Empire, and it will generate conversation about modern governments. It allows students to see an ancient civilization as important because Rome continues to stand as a symbolic model for expanding national interests. In fact, many scholars compare the problems of Rome and the contemporary world with the hope of making constructive changes.

Students should be divided into groups, each with a different focus—e.g., architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, philosophy, and the Roman political system. Have the students review their text and conduct an online search for additional source material on their area of focus. Each group of students should prepare a presentation of no more than five minutes to make to the class. In addition, students can prepare a paragraph of at least 75 words that explains how their artifact demonstrates Rome’s greatness.

This exercise is fun for the students and the instructor, but it is grounded in course objectives. While teaching students about history, this activity helps them focus on important themes. It encourages them to practice synthesizing ideas from diverse sources, helps them understand how a variety of materials can support a single concept, allows them to practice forming their ideas into a written and/or presentation format, and elevates the compilation of historical fact to a context that helps students see how Rome still influences our modern lives. It proves there is more to learn about Rome than gladiators and Caesar salad.

Marjorie Berman, *Department Chair, Humanities, Social and Behavioral Science*

Cynde Simms, *Adjunct Professor, Humanities*

For further information, contact the authors at Red Rocks Community College, 13300 West Sixth Avenue, Lakewood, CO 80228. e-mail: Cysimms@aol.com