

Teaching with Biography in American History:

Issues, Questions, and Possibilities

(from surveys and bluebooks)

OUSD Teaching American History Project

2004-2005

Standards and Time

What do we mean by teaching
with biography?

Questions and comments from survey:

- Which ones for middle schools?
- Connection to scope and sequence, how to fit into a crowded curriculum
- How to best use excerpts and mini-lessons, due to time restrictions of focusing on one person for extended period?
- I am worried about time constraints. Choice - which ones to pick and why?

Who?

- A Question of Selection

- Curriculum
- Significance
- Teacher knowledge
- Student interest
- The known and the unknown individual
- Resources

Questions and comments from survey:

- The literacy of my students is a concern.
- How do I determine who to teach?
- I would love to integrate “lesser known” people.
- One person is not always indicative of a particular time period.

Biography – Partial List of Significant Individuals Cited in the Standards

5 th grade	8 th grade	11 th grade
<p>Christopher Columbus John Marshall Sequoyah Roger Williams William Penn John Winthrop Patrick Henry Thomas Jefferson George Washington Benjamin Franklin Marquis Marie Joseph de Lafayette <u>Phillis Wheatley</u> <u>Abigail Adams</u> James Madison <u>Merriweather Lewis</u> John Fremont</p>	<p>James Madison George Washington Thomas Jefferson Horace Mann Elizabeth Cady Stanton Ralph Waldo Emerson Louisa May Alcott Nat Turner Frederick Douglass Andrew Jackson <u>Annie Bidwell</u> <u>Harriet Tubman</u> William Lloyd Garrison <u>Dred Scott</u> Abraham Lincoln Robert E. Lee Andrew Carnegie</p>	<p>William Graham Sumner Theodore Roosevelt Marcus Garvey <u>Zora Neale Hurston</u> Herbert Hoover Franklin Delano Roosevelt <u>Fred Korematsu</u> Harry S. Truman Alger Hiss <u>Thurgood Marshall</u> Rosa Parks Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X John F. Kennedy Lyndon B. Johnson Richard Nixon Ronald Reagan</p>

Resources

- Individual biographies for participants
- Presentations
- Materials connected to presentations
 - Documents
 - Narratives
 - Sample lessons

Questions and comments from survey:

- How would I obtain 160 copies of a biography so that all my students have a copy?
- Access to materials both meaningful and accessible for ELL students?
- I just don't know the available literature.

Why Teach with Biography?

from Survey	from Clarence Walker's presentation	from Project

How?

We begin with three areas of questions:

- “Who is _____? What can we know of his or her life, how can we know it?” (*time, place, evidence, multiple perspective*)
- “Why is he or she significant? Why should we care about him or her?” (*historical significance*)
- “What we might learn about American history by studying his or her life. How should it shape our understanding of American history?” (*empathy, moral judgment, interpretation*)

How to help students answer these questions?

- Resources, lessons, activities, student products
- A focus on historical thinking - All work together towards a judgment of historical significance
 - time and place
 - evidence
 - multiple perspectives
 - historical empathy and moral judgment
 - interpretation

Questions and comments from survey:

- How do we present the good and the bad?
- It would be interesting to do interdisciplinary teaching with an English class.
- Often the argument made by the biography is ignored by the teacher, the biography is presented as objective fact.
- Issues of access - I can not get enough sources and materials for 130 students. I am the only US History teacher at my site - I need support.

Examining Student Responses to Very Important People Survey

Questions to consider:

- What is the students' narrative of American history?
- Does the list of names reflect what we do in class?
- What sources of information seem to influence student thinking? Where are they learning American history?
- What questions about teaching and learning American history are raised by this list?
- What issues and concerns are raised by this list?
- Implications for classroom practice? Uses with students?