

Spring 2024

History Education: Learning History from Community College Students' Perspectives

Mylinh V. Pham
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_dissertations



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pham, Mylinh V., "History Education: Learning History from Community College Students' Perspectives" (2024). *Dissertations*. 105.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.286c-jjdt>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_dissertations/105

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

HISTORY EDUCATION: LEARNING HISTORY FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE
STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Mylinh V. Pham

May 2024

© 2024

Mylinh V. Pham

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

HISTORY EDUCATION: LEARNING HISTORY FROM COMMUNITY
COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

by

Mylinh V. Pham

APPROVED FOR THE EDUCATIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2024

Megan Thiele Strong, Ph.D	Department of Sociology
Ferdinand Rivera, Ph.D	Department of Mathematics and Statistics
Alicia De Toro, Ed.D	Department of Environmental Studies, De Anza College
Noni M. Reis, Ed.D	Department of Educational Leadership

ABSTRACT

HISTORY EDUCATION: LEARNING HISTORY FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

by Mylinh V. Pham

Given the current political climate of division, the study of history is important now more than ever, but the value of the study of history has been marginalized. This study used student focus groups to understand ways in which history could be taught in such a way that its importance is emphasized through relevance and connection to current social and political issues and through student-centered learning. This study also determined how history could help students evaluate and think critically about historical content. This study drew on the experiences of community college students who have taken a higher education history course with the dissertation author to determine how students might want history to be taught. Findings shed light on how to facilitate deeper student interest, engagement, and application of history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family and friends for their support through this tough journey. Thank you to my colleagues who kept encouraging me and telling me I got this!

I have to specifically mention my sister, Mylan, who helped me tremendously with the data tables, references, and formatting. Thank you for helping your old fogie sister because I'm kinda computer illiterate. Thanks for doing your docs and sheets stuff because you helping me out with that was a lot faster than me googling and figuring it all out by myself.

Dr. Nannette Regua, yes, "Doctor"! ... Thank you so much for your peer support. Thank you for sitting through that 1.5 hour with me over Zoom while I rambled on about my dissertation and you providing such valuable feedback for my defense. I don't know who else would have been patient enough to do that for me! Thank you for the chats and dinner, and I hope to have more of those now that we're done!

I also have to thank my students, past and present. They were part of my inspiration for this project, and I am so appreciative of being able to learn from them. They are one of the reasons I do what I do and that I love what I do. Also, much appreciation specifically to my former students who participated in this process and journey with me by taking part in my research.

Big thanks to Drs. Thiele Strong, Rivera, De Toro, and Reis. Wow! This was one heck of a ride! This journey was not easy, but in those hardships and struggles, I learned a lot about myself and the process of it all. I have all of you to thank for that. This was probably the most collaborative project I have ever done with so many intellectuals!

Dr. Thiele Strong, thank you so much for not giving up on me and this process. Your support was instrumental in pushing me to the finish. It was very rough, but we made it through! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

“Dr. Ferdie”, there were many times where if you did not know it, you actually talked me off the ledge and made me feel like it was all doable. Thank you for holding my hand in those moments of despair.

Alicia! Remember when you wrote that letter of recommendation for me to get into this program? We’re on the other side of that now! Thinking of your accomplishments gave me that extra juice to keep going. Thank you for the inspiration.

Dr. Reis, there are not enough words or gift cards for the amount of gratitude I have for you for being with me from the beginning of this program to the end. I think you saved me in a lot of ways – from myself, from the process, and from despair. I definitely could not have done this without you, and I would have been so lost without you.

Dr. Chen, you saw me through my master’s and now you have seen me through my doctorate. I remember you telling me that you were not surprised when I decided to apply to this program because you had a feeling that I was going to do something bigger with all the thinking I do. Although you said you are a little jealous of my process, I would say I am jealous of yours. I wished for simplicity and easy, but with your help, I can do complicated and difficult too. I got that ghost off my back!

Dr. Kline: Doc, Shifu, Sensei ... I am the history instructor that I am now because of you. I am hoping to continue your legacy and inspire a new generation of history majors like you

did for me. I miss you at work every day. It's not the same without you. You were like my security blanket. Now, it's so cold.

This was a journey of “firsts” out of my three degrees: It is the first time I worked consistently throughout the entire process (even summers!) without any real breaks; the first time I received all A's in all the courses of the program (not even a single A minus!); the first time I had perfect attendance in every class; the first time I was not afraid of sounding stupid and speaking out in class (frankly, I didn't give a shit); and the first time I finished on time. I guess I am adulting! I also did not cry once while writing my dissertation compared to the numerous times I cried while writing my thesis. (Doesn't mean it was any less painful. I think it was actually a little more painful this time around, but I'm just older and too tired to cry about it.)

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my dad. He would have loved to hear people call me “Doctor Pham”. I miss his spaghetti.

I want my daughter to know she is capable of doing and being anything she wants. It’s “Doctor Mommy” now, okay?

What is not a “first time” during this process is the support (when she feels like it) from my mom, who has always been my biggest cheerleader, although not loudly.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	xii
List of Abbreviations	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem	1
Background and Context.....	1
Pedagogical History	4
Statement of the Problem.....	5
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Questions	9
Definition of Terms.....	9
Site Selection and Sample.....	11
Scope and Limitations of the Study	11
Conceptual Framework.....	12
Assumptions, Background, and Role of the Researcher in the Study	16
Overview of the Dissertation	18
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	20
Introduction.....	20
Historical Perspectives of How History Has Been Taught in the U.S.....	20
Problems in History Education	20
Solutions to Problems in History Education.....	22
Relevance of History to Students.....	26
Educational Focus and Funding.....	26
The Connection Between History and Politics.....	27
Effects of Pedagogical Approaches on Critical Thinking.....	28
The Pandemic and Online Learning	28
Not Focusing in History in Education	29
History and Critical Thinking	30
Gaps in Literature	31
Summary	32
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology	35
Overview	35
Research Design.....	35
Demographic Characteristics	36
Sample and Selection Criteria.....	36
Sample Profile.....	37
Data Collection	40
Participants.....	40
Data Sources	40

Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research: Trustworthiness	41
Data Analysis	42
Limitations	43
Chapter 4: Findings of the Study	44
Participants.....	44
Overview of Findings	45
Presentation of the Data.....	47
RQ1: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Relevant?.....	47
RQ2: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Engaging?	57
RQ3: In an Era of Alternative Facts, How Do Students Evaluate or Think Critically About Historical Content (Topics/Content/Perspective)?.....	64
Additional Frequently Mentioned Theme.....	70
Summary	72
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations	74
Introduction.....	74
Discussion.....	74
RQ1: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Relevant?.....	74
RQ2: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Engaging?	77
RQ3: In an Era of Alternative Facts, How Do Students Evaluate or Think Critically About Historical Content (Topics/Content/Perspective)?.....	80
Modality as a Common Finding Across All Three RQs.....	83
Connecting Findings to Contextual Framework.....	84
Recommendations for Further Research.....	85
Military Veterans	85
Comparing Responses Between Gender.....	86
Comparing Responses Among Ethnicity/Race.....	86
Researcher’s Contribution to History Pedagogy.....	87
Epilogue	87
References.....	92

Appendix

A Interview Questions	98
B Coding Table and Frequency of Themes	100

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Gender breakdown of focus group participants. Eighteen of 20 participants responded to the survey.....	39
Figure 2.	Ethnic/racial breakdown of focus group participants. Eighteen of 20 participants responded to the survey. Some were multiracial, selecting more than one category.....	39
Figure A1.	Pseudonyms of participants along with the frequency count of theme mentions.....	100

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB – California Assembly Bill
BLM – Black Lives Matter
CNN – Cable News Network
CP – Critical Pedagogy
CRP – Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
CRT – Critical Race Theory
CSU – California State University system
ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education
NAEP – National Assessment of Education Progress
NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NCLB – No Child Left Behind
SJSU – San Jose State University
STAR – Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act
STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and computer science
UC – University of California system
UCLA – University of California, Los Angeles
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US – United States
USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Background and Context

If students believe that the subject of history is simply nothing more than memorizing facts about dead people, they feel bored and are less likely to retain information (Milo, 2017). We have all heard that quote from George Santayana (1905) before: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 132). As a student of history, this is a quote that I am familiar with, but to the general public that are not versed in the field of history, the question is why is the past important, and why is it worth remembering? If sustaining our democracy is so important and learning history is one of the ways that we can impart knowledge on Americans to keep our system of government functioning, why is there not an emphasis on the study of history, and how can we get to that point of emphasizing and understanding its importance? My hope is that this study will provide some ideas on how we can provide insights on the connection between the importance of learning history and reinforce that importance in our education system.

Ironically, some of the factors that have contributed to the decline of history are educational policies and historical events themselves. After the USSR launched *Sputnik* in 1957, the United States, fearing that the country had lagged too far behind the Soviet Union, passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided support for students in math, foreign languages, science, and technology in its attempt to remain competitive with the Soviet Union in the areas of science and education (Roark et al., 2020). The Eisenhower administration also created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during this time. The focus and funding were geared toward the science, technology,

engineering, math, and computer science (STEM) field (Johnson, 1965). Again, in 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative on Educational Reform* was published during Ronald Reagan's presidency. This report was critical of the American school system and why it was failing (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The blueprint of what the model suggested in the study is still used in public high schools to this day, and mainly focuses on math and English. Fast forward to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 (Boehner, 2002) under Bush Junior's administration, which set national education standards in the form of standardized tests and penalized failing schools. The assessment tested only math and English proficiency and pressured many teachers to "teach the test" rather than contributing their own critical and creative curricula in the classroom (Boehner, 2002). During the Obama administration, NCLB was then revamped and given a new name: Every Student Succeeds Act (Lamar, 2015), reauthorized every eight years, would overhaul the standardized testing format, but still mainly only emphasize on STEM and English. In focusing mainly on STEM and English, other subjects such as history were ignored. Additionally, many teachers of history at the K-12 level in California need only to demonstrate knowledge in general social sciences, rather than earn a specific degree in history (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, n.d.) in order to teach history.

With all the focus the United States has on STEM and English, it is no wonder that scores on national tests in civics, history, and geography are alarmingly low with only about a quarter of students scoring at a proficient level (Wexler, 2019). Brownfeld (2018) referenced a survey, conducted by Schoen Consulting (2018) for The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which found 41% of the 1,350 American adults aged 18 and older

who were interviewed could not identify Auschwitz as a Nazi extermination camp and the purposes behind it, and that 11% of the interviewees had not heard of the Holocaust. The results are far worse with millennials: 66% could not identify Auschwitz, and 22% were ignorant of the Holocaust (Schoen Consulting, 2018). The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP; 2014) found that 50% of American high school students did not know whether the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, or the War of 1812 came before or after the American Revolution. Without knowing the history of how this country became what it is today, “the ignorance of history in high schools, colleges and universities (becomes) dangerous to the future of a free society” (Brownfeld, 2018, para. 1).

In a recent *New York Times* article published on May 3, 2023, the national test scores for U.S. history have dropped significantly, and the pandemic is not the only thing responsible for the decline (Mervosh, 2023). This trend has been consistent even prior to the pandemic. In a 2019 article, Wexler noted that college students were unable to answer simple history questions such as “Which country did the United States win their independence from?”; “Who won the Civil War?”; any of the rights protected by the First Amendment, and “What are the three branches of the government?” Because of the decline in simple historical knowledge, in 2023, U.S. Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, blasted politicians for trying to limit history curriculum, going even further to target those limiting curricula focusing on race (Press Office, 2023). Furthermore, he noted the lack of funding for the study of civics and social sciences compared with the STEM fields.

Pedagogical History

Students take history to fulfill general education requirements. In many history courses, students simply passively receive material without much critical thought (Cote, 2017). They are not supported to take an active role in their learning. Due to this lack of involvement, their higher-level thinking is not activated, which leads to disinterest in the subject. Cote (2017) and Perrotta and Bohan (2013) implemented different teaching strategies in their own history courses. The researchers wanted to know if they could change their methods of teaching in order to support an increase in student engagement and interest.

Cote (2017) used a “mastery-based pedagogy, one in which students learn by doing, starting as apprentices to an experienced person” (p. 598) in the hope that her college students would be more active participants in their learning. Cote found that some of her students did not find the course particularly rewarding compared with other courses. However, they thought that they engaged in more critical thinking in her class in comparison with other similar level courses in history. Cote somewhat succeeded in her goal of increasing critical thinking among her students, but she might have failed in encouraging them to understand the relevance and appreciation of learning history.

Perrotta and Bohan (2013) employed a number of mixed strategies to incite active learning among 79 community college students. Specifically, Perrotta and Bohan used three different methods to foster active learning for a period of one week in their history courses. The methods were (a) group discussions on engagement, (b) instructor as facilitator on students’ engagement, and (c) the use of graphic organizers to foster engagement. The findings included the following:

The survey data revealed that some active-learning strategies improved student engagement in the undergraduate history courses, and others did not. Students indicated that preparing for multiple-choice exams, instructor support during group work, enhanced lectures, and group discussions on course material improved engagement. Students identified the poor attitudinal objectives of some peers, the overabundance of collaborative writing assignments, and the use of graphic organizers as least effective in promoting engagement in the courses. (Perrotta & Bohan, 2013, pp. 19-20)

While they had hoped that using graphic organizers and group discussions would foster greater student engagement with their students, the students did not report enthusiasm about the graphic organizers. However, the students did report positive benefits from peer-to-peer discussions and instructor support during group work. Further, they appreciated enhanced lectures.

In summary, there were mixed findings in the studies by Cote (2017) and Perrotta and Bohan (2013). For teaching history in general, they employed different methods which could possibly increase student engagement. However, the question still remains in terms of whether such methods could effectively increase student interest and relevance to the subject. Engagement could simply imply more student interaction, but that does not necessarily lead to interest or connection to the subject.

Statement of the Problem

Although U.S. history is currently a general education requirement in K-16 institutions and serves to educate students on social and political issues, many students have “negative attitudes” toward social studies and history courses (Strauss, 2017, para. 1). A couple years ago, a student in my class told me he did not understand why he needed to take history in order to graduate from college. He did not think it was useful to him in any way and did not

see the purpose in taking classes that had nothing to do with his major. This student captures the reluctance I think many students have about history when they initially come to my class.

Students struggle with history for a variety of reasons. Increasingly, students do not see the importance of the study of history, believing that it is only relevant in class and not broadly applicable outside of the classroom (Cote, 2017). Also, many of these students do not understand why studying past events and issues could help them understand why current events seem to be the way they are in the present, including what to do if change is needed to make conditions better for our societies. Perrotta and Bohan's (2013) study, which they conducted at a metropolitan community college in the southeast, noted that history was "one of two areas in the college with the highest rates of student failures and withdrawals based upon department assessments" (pp. 20-21). This study indicates history is a subject that is difficult for many students to comprehend.

Additionally, students experience anxiety when it comes to studying history. Cote (2017) conducted a study using her own courses, in which she surveyed students' anxiety about taking history courses by reflectively ranking their apprehension at the beginning of the course. Her students had an average of 6.75 out of a scale from 0-10 level of apprehension, with four out of twelve respondents selecting 10, which was the highest level of apprehension possible. This study documents the anxiety students have about studying history at the university level.

In sum, student challenges include lack of understanding the importance of history as part of their education, difficulty with the material as well as anxiety about the subject. Because of their struggles with the subject of history, students fail to realize the applicability of

history, which is supposed to teach them to learn to think critically, write analytically, and work across disciplinary lines (Masur, 2019). Given these realities, it follows that students are not motivated to engage in their history courses. If history is seen as lacking relevance and without engagement in history, how can students think critically about current events? This study attends to this worthy consideration.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to understand how the subject of history is viewed by students, how student engagement can be increased, how relevancy of history can be increased, and how we can increase students' critical thinking skills in our history courses. The study of history is being chipped away slowly beginning with the Student Transfer Achievement Reform (STAR) Act (LegiScan, 2010) in California, which limits the number of units required for graduation in the CSU system and creates a one in, one out system of graduation requirements. In addition to the STAR Act, California passed AB 1460 (California Legislative Information [CLI], 2020), which makes ethnic studies a graduation requirement for graduation in the CSU system. With ethnic studies coming in as a new graduation requirement, a “comparable” course needs to be taken out. Based on my analysis, it would be a matter of time until U.S. history would be a casualty of these legislative acts. This was proven when the newly revised STAR Act (AB 928; CLI, 2021) was passed. AB 928 was meant to streamline the transfer process for students coming from community colleges to the California university systems (CSU and UC), and part of the way that is to happen is to further reduce the number of requirements students need to take at the lower division level.

U.S. history happens to be one of the courses California legislators are looking to eliminate as a requirement at the lower division level for general education.

A possible consequence of AB 928 (CLI, 2021) might be that schools interpret having history lessons in the K-12 level and then just once again at the upper level of higher education as sufficient. However, I believe offering a history course at every level of education could help students to think critically and learn to be aware of social and political issues in order to make them more civically engaged and knowledgeable. In a study conducted for the *American Historical Association* in 2021 by Burkholder and Schaffer, they found that those who expressed no interest in history were the least civically engaged. The consequences of this could be far reaching as evidenced in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. About two-thirds of respondents that came from a CNN poll support *Roe v. Wade* (Agiesta, 2022); however, in a democracy in which representatives are elected to represent the will of the people, the people elected representatives who instead made decisions that ultimately led to the overturning of legislation that 63% of Americans support. If citizens were more civically engaged, they might have been more aware of how hard fought the battle for *Roe v. Wade* was and make wiser choices when voting for their representatives.

I not only teach history, but I teach my students to be aware of current events and tie the current events back to historical content from the past. Students need to understand and see the patterns in history so that they can make better decisions and work to reinforce our democracy, but how can that happen if many students do not see the value in history? Instead of simply getting the material covered, I want students to actually learn history and understand how important it is. Rather than listing out techniques on how to teach history, I

wanted to ask students how they comprehend and learn historical context and how they feel it should be taught in order to be of value to them.

Research Questions

This dissertation research addressed the following research questions below.

1. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more relevant?
2. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more engaging?
3. In an era of alternative facts, how do students evaluate or think critically about historical content (topics/content/perspective)?

Definition of Terms

The following are initial definitions identified for this study. Citations are listed for each term.

1. *Alternative facts*. “Statements on key policy issues that directly or indirectly contradict real facts” (Barrera et al., 2020, p. 1).
2. *American exceptionalism*. Focusing on the “greatest triumphs” of the United States and ignoring its horrors (Conway, 2015, para. 17); the U.S. is “a special case ‘outside’ the normal patterns and laws of history” (Tyrrell, 1991, p. 1031).
3. *Counter-narrative*. “Stories that detail the experiences and perspectives of those who are historically oppressed, excluded, or silenced in educational settings” (Bergen et al., 2023, p. 421).

4. *Critical thinking*. In the history field, different educators weigh in on what critical thinking means. For this study, critical thinking means “the making of judgments” (Moore, 2013, p. 510), and the ability to evaluate and interpret information in a logical manner.
5. *General education history course*. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; 2012), general education “is defined as programs that are designed to develop learners’ general knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as literacy and numeracy skills, often to prepare participants for more advanced education programmes at the same or a higher International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level and to lay the foundation for lifelong learning” (p. 14). For the context of this research, a general education history course is defined as a history survey course that is covered in lower division higher education in California.
6. *Historical analysis/interpretation*. To engage in *historical analysis and interpretation* students must draw upon their skills of *historical comprehension*. In fact, there is no sharp line separating the two categories. Certain of the skills involved in comprehension overlap the skills involved in analysis and are essential to it ... Analysis builds upon the skills of comprehension; it obliges the student to assess the evidence on which the historian has drawn and determine the soundness of interpretations created from that evidence. It goes without saying that in acquiring these analytical skills students must develop the ability to differentiate between

expressions of opinion, no matter how passionately delivered, and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence (UCLA History, n.d., para. 4).

7. *Student engagement.* According to The Glossary of Education Reform (2016), student engagement is defined as the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.

Site Selection and Sample

My participants for this study were selected from a community college in the Bay Area of Northern California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. This area attracts tech workers from all over the world, but the students who attend this college are diverse socially and economically. The cost of living in the area is one of the highest in the nation. The median family income of a student from the Community College District (student participants were from) is \$73,600, and 32% come from the top 20 percent. The college has a total student population of 16,414; with a gender distribution of 49.58% male, 48.39% female, 0.96% non-binary, and 1.07% unknown. Ethnic demographics are as follows: Asian: 36.21%; Filipino: 5.37%; Hispanic: 27.63%; White: 17.42%; Two or more: 5.34%; Black/African American: 2.72%; Unknown: 4.7%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.44%; and American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.15% (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office [CCCCO], n.d.).

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The participants for this research were from one community college. This was not a random sample, but a sample of convenience. The results were only partially representative

of one particular area in California and could not be used to determine the perspectives of all students in California, let alone the entire country. Additionally, the study was limited to community college students. Other issues that did not involve relevance, engagement, and validity of facts were not accounted for in this dissertation.

I solicited students from my classes only, which means the only higher education history class experience of these students may have been only their experience with me as their instructor. Additionally, the focus group questions that were used were questions that I wanted to get a better understanding of, rather than a list that was compiled by multiple history instructors. The participants were all students around the South Bay region of California, which is home to Silicon Valley, which can mean high-achieving students or students who are influenced by the technology field.

Conceptual Framework

In analyzing my data, I drew on two theoretical frameworks: (a) Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP; 1995; 2014), and (b) Henry Giroux's (2016) Critical Pedagogy (CP). Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the significance of incorporating diverse perspectives and narratives to encourage a more inclusive understanding of history in using CRP in history education. According to Ladson-Billings, CRP in history education will promote critical consciousness, empower students to challenge traditional "Western-centric" narratives, and also create a more culturally responsive history curriculum by using the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and connecting that to historical context to their lived experiences, which would make the content more relevant to the students. By incorporating significant events and narratives in history class, students can better relate to

historical events and develop a deeper sense of pride in their heritage and cultural background (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Adding a culturally relevant curriculum to a history course is important as students will be encouraged to question dominant historical narratives, recognize biases, and listen to different perspectives. This can be done in a variety of ways in history education: analyzing primary sources, evaluating evidence, and constructing their own interpretation of historical events (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Additionally, history education should challenge the Eurocentric focus of traditional history curricula. Ladson-Billings advocates for the inclusion of counter-narratives that shed light on marginalized histories, including those of indigenous peoples, minorities, and women. Integrating these narratives fosters a more comprehensive understanding of history and empowers students from diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2007), which would make learning history more inclusive.

Teaching history in this way can promote empathy by encouraging students to analyze different perspectives from the past, which can enable students to comprehend historical events, understand the motivations behind decisions, and recognize the impact these decisions can have on different groups of people. Developing historical empathy allows students to connect the past to contemporary issues (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (2014) also stresses the importance of history education as a tool for promoting social justice. By analyzing historical injustices and examining the struggles of marginalized groups, students can develop a sense of agency and commitment to creating a more equitable society. History education can inspire students to take action against discrimination and contribute positively to their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2014), which in my own analysis is why

conservatives have such a problem with CRP and Critical Race Theory (CRT) because they do not want to be challenged.

Similarly, Henry Giroux's (2016) CP, "views education as central to creating students who are socially responsible and civically engaged citizens" (p. 356). In applying this to the context of history education, history educators should prioritize helping students understand historical events within their social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. In my own analysis of Giroux's critical approach, history education should seek to challenge simple narratives and encourage critical thinking about the interactions that have shaped historical processes, such as how various power structures and dominant ideologies have influenced and shaped societies across the world. This process would allow students to recognize how historical narratives can be constructed to serve specific interests and perpetuate power dynamics. History education should also seek to encourage students to understand the multiple interpretations and perspectives on historical events and figures. This would foster critical thinking skills and help students recognize that history is composed of multiple interpretations, which are influenced by the biases of historians. This can also help students learn to recognize alternative "facts" and conspiracy theories.

Giroux (2016) believes that "education is the foundation for any working democracy and teachers are the most responsible agents for fostering that education" (p. 356). As with Ladson-Billings (1995), Giroux is critical of "Western-centric" ideals and colonialism. History education should challenge "Western-centric" biases in historical narratives and broaden the scope to include non-Western global histories. This can help students develop a

more inclusive and interconnected understanding of the world's diverse societies and cultures.

In using CP in history education, students are able to “engag(e) in a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice” (Giroux, 2016, p. 357). History education that is rooted in CP should actively seek to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups and individuals. If history is taught critically, it can bring into light past injustices, atrocities, and human rights violations. This approach could encourage students to acknowledge historical wrongs and can also promote empathy and solidarity with diverse communities. This in turn could foster a sense of responsibility to addressing present-day inequalities and may inspire students to be more engaged socially and politically. By understanding historical struggles for social change and progress, students can be motivated to participate in shaping a more equitable future. Being aware of social and political issues allows for students to understand democracy and its importance in our society, especially in our current political climate.

The responses from the student interviews were compared using CRP and CP to examine whether the history course(s) which they have taken covered content in a way that was relevant and engaging to the students, and whether they encouraged students to be more aware and conscious about current social and political issues. The interviews tried to get a sense of whether students were taught history in a manner where they were encouraged to critically think, and did this enable students to recognize alternative facts easily and understand the threat that these “facts” pose to our democracy? Depending on how the content was taught, the hope was that students of history would have been able to make

connections and be critical of what they read and saw. This work sought to inform teachers of history and those interested as to how content can become more student-centered and representative of the diversity of learners within a CRP and critical pedagogical framework to boost student engagement and relevancy of history.

Assumptions, Background, and Role of the Researcher in the Study

I am currently a history instructor at the community college level. I describe myself as personable and sociable and bring that part of me into the classroom to engage students in a subject that I have heard being described as “so boring”. My goal in teaching is to decrease that resistance and show how important learning history is, especially in a time where many people are prone to misinformation from the many different sources readily available. I have had quite a few students coming into my class expressing they were only taking history because it is a general education requirement and do not see its importance, but leaving saying they now understand why it is important to learn and know about history. A few students have even decided to major, switch major, or double-major in history after taking my classes. I have also had multiple students taking multiple different history courses with me, upwards to seven different history courses. My communication skills and delivery of the subject have a lot to do with how I engage my students and increase their interest in history.

In my classes, I bring in current events and also use modern analogies that college-aged students would understand when talking about historical events. I also make an effort to get to know my students and have them know a little bit about me. I do what I can on my end to make the class more interesting, be it using humor, bringing in topics that can affect the students, or being what one of my former students calls “REAL AF” (real as f**k). I do not

mask truths and talk only about the good parts of history, but I talk a lot about the horrors of human beings, and the causes of effects of these actions or lack of.

I also give time and space to my students to talk about their backgrounds and experiences because I feel students can learn from listening to one another and what their classmates have been through. The same goes with me where I am transparent with students about my background and how that shapes my perspectives on historical topics and events. I feel many students appreciate the authenticity, and it also helps them to be more empathetic to others, which is all part of the way I want to teach history.

As a history instructor, I believe in creating a learning environment to engage students in the conversation of historical topics, as uncomfortable as they may be. As a student, I found the most interesting aspects of history are the conflicts and reasoning behind those conflicts that teachers rarely touch upon. History is an important subject to make people more informed civically in order to make decisions that impact us all. Without the study of history, many will be prone to misinformation and also lack the knowledge in deciphering what is real and what is fake. Without physically being in a classroom, the chances of listening to and learning from different perspectives of classmates could be diminished. I value education and I believe students who go to school should learn and have a broad and wider range of education and that history is as important as STEM, if not more, as it teaches us to learn from others, and to question sources.

My goal is always to have students learn and engage in the content for it to become more relevant to their lives and things that can affect their lives. As a first-generation Vietnamese American woman born of refugee parents, I understand the importance of how my

background can affect the way I view history and the way it is taught. I am cognizant of this when teaching my students, bringing in content that I feel would represent them and their experiences. I understand the importance of teaching a history that represents the diversity of our country and the students that I teach. U.S. history is composed of stories from people from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, races, experiences, etc., and I try to implement these voices into my lessons as much as I can. I steer away from teaching “American exceptionalism,” which is a history that portrays the United States as the beacon of democracy and the best and most perfect country in the world. I teach history differently because I believe the “American exceptionalism” type of history tends to be a “white-man’s U.S. history,” which most of the time conveys an “America is best” attitude and can contribute to producing replacement theory crazies who do not know or understand the issues and problems that have been ongoing in the country. I find that most students whom I have taught are more interested in learning the truth about U.S. history, no matter how bad it is. They would rather learn the truth, no matter how ugly, than to hear only about the good things about the United States, which I believe is partly why students find history boring. They do not see themselves represented in that kind of history and it can completely turn them off to understanding history’s importance.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides a review of the research related to the concept of the study. A discussion of the methods used to conduct the study is presented in Chapter Three. Chapter Four provides the results of the study. A summary of key findings, including a discussion of

the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research studies are found in Chapter Five.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This study sought to understand why some students do not see the subject of history as a critical subject and in what ways it can be changed. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more relevant?
2. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more engaging?
3. In an era of alternative facts, how do students evaluate or think critically about historical content (topics/content/perspective)?

This chapter is organized into three sections, as follows: (a) a historical perspective of how history has been taught in the U.S.; (b) relevance of history to students; and (c) how pedagogical approaches, such as critical, inclusive, representative, and diverse approaches could increase student interest and the development of critical thinking skills.

Historical Perspectives of How History Has Been Taught in the U.S.

Problems in History Education

This section of the literature review focuses on the problems of history education such as critiques of how it has been taught and the content of history courses in the United States at the P-16 level. The issues surrounding history education is not something new as evidenced in a *New York Times* article dated from 1943. Benjamin Fine (1943) noted that although students had taken history in high school, and retake history in college, they have “striking

ignorance of even the most elementary aspects of United States history” which leads to misinformation (Fine, 1943, para. 1). Not much has changed since 1943, as a survey of sixth and twelfth graders from 1982 in a Midwest school district in the United States found the students were “largely indifferent” and found history class boring (Strauss, 2017, para. 1). The attitudes of students toward history seem to be consistent and unchanging through time in the United States. In fact, the *American Historical Association* published research statistics that showed a steep decline in history majors in the United States from 34,642 in 2008 to 24,266 in 2017 (Schmidt, 2018), and the ongoing lack of interest and non-critical thinking has now led to a decline in organizational support and institutional majors.

Because many students feel history is boring, they fail to see its importance. Learning history allows people to view political and social events in a globalized perspective, which shows how interconnected the people of the world are, and this happens through historical knowledge (Teachwire, n.d.). Historical wisdom can lead to international political wisdom (Gilbert, 1968). To think historically is to recognize that all problems, all situations, all institutions exist in contexts that must be understood before informed decisions can be made (Grossman, 2016). We study American diplomatic history to find clues about American behavior from the past, which can lead us to clues about American behavior in the present (Gilbert, 1968). This is nothing new, but people usually do not make the connections between history and social connections (Teachwire, n.d.). History students learn what drives and motivates human behavior from elections to social movements to board rooms (Grossman, 2016). Students of history can generate a kind of wisdom about human affairs that helps us to understand the world in all its richness and complexity (Gilbert, 1968).

Solutions to Problems in History Education

In trying to solve the issues of history education in the United States, Milo (2017) suggests adults seem to come to terms with history after they have passed through the trials of their own education with the subject. Learning history as a student seemed to be an arduous task, but when not faced with the pressure of memorizing dates and facts about dead people, adults seem to be more interested in the past. The memories of history classes are similar among adults in that most seemed to have found history boring when they were students but have found a new interest in it later on in life (Milo, 2017). Why does this matter? George Santayana (1905) said it best: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 132). This quote has been butchered throughout the years, but the lesson remains the same: If we do not learn from the past, history is bound to repeat itself, which it has been doing. In studying the past, we can learn and possibly predict the long-lasting effects of a decision, rather than have our own expected outcome that sometimes does not come to fruition (Gilbert, 1968).

However, a teacher gets to the point of transforming students’ minds from simple recall to independence and inquiry is the ultimate goal of teaching history (Milo, 2017). Teaching history does not only have to be about teaching boring facts about dead people. Why is it that a historical movie (however inaccurate it is) like *Gladiator* can captivate an audience, but not history curricula? Both are set in the past and are based on dead people, albeit history curricula are based on real dead people, but why is the story about the dead fake person more popular? Rather than teach history as a memorize-and-regurgitate type of discipline, history can also be taught as a series of compelling narratives that provide the cognitive framework

needed to absorb and analyze information about the world around us (Wexler, 2019) by teaching it just like a movie. For history to be interesting, there has to be some sort of connection with personal stories, but oftentimes, history is taught without much substance (Milo, 2017). This is where a teacher earns his or her money. We all love stories that pull us in and do not gloss over the excitement and make us part of the plot and highlight the humanity and struggle with themes that we can relate to, good or bad, right or wrong (Milo, 2017). Bringing in different perspectives of history and including all the bad things can draw students in. Who does not like drama? History is filled with them, but that is not something many teachers or instructors tap into.

How then can we teach history where students are drawn in? There is a battle between content and methods of teaching history, and the methods of teaching history is losing (Milo, 2017). Teachers need to be able to ask the right kind of questions to get students to critically think and reason (Wexler, 2019), but how do we get there? Conway (2015) points out that “History is essentially a collection of memories, analyzed and reduced into meaningful conclusions – but that collection depends on the memories chosen” (para. 7). Let us take the example of a history textbook. The reason why certain sections of a world history textbook are longer than others is because the people putting the curriculum together do not know much about the shorter sections (Milo, 2017). One of the problems that arises when authors select which history to represent, is that many students end up learning history from memories that have been chosen for them, and the chosen history that is written about and taught in schools is usually that of a “Western-centric” history (Teachwire, n.d.; Washington, 2018).

Additionally, although the demographics of students in the United States have changed, the topics and ways history is taught in the country has largely remained the same (Conway, 2015; Teachwire, n.d.; Washington, 2018). Until recently, very rarely has history been taught from the perspective of the people that had been exploited and dominated by Westerners (Washington, 2018). This could be one of the major problems of the lack of student interest and passive learning in history because students cannot relate to the colonizers. Learning from a “Western-centric” perspective often teaches “American exceptionalism”, a term that often masks the horrors of America’s past with its greatest triumphs (Conway, 2015). This type of history is not only unrelatable to most students, especially students of color, but it also reinforces white superiority and othering:

That students with vastly different backgrounds are still being taught that only one history is worth knowing reveals what has always been a deeper question in American education: whose history is essential, and what are we teaching students when we tell them that theirs is not? In the fight for racial equity in the classroom, we must stress the importance of students learning from a curriculum which reinforces that their own histories, and by extension, their own identities, matter. (Washington, 2018, para. 15)

The College Board also took a step backwards from promoting diversity in school curricula by removing topics such as Confucius and African kingdoms (Washington, 2018). They fail to see teaching history from a diverse perspective can make the topic richer, and enable teachers to tell a fuller story, in “bright technicolor” (Teachwire, n.d.). Implementing curricula that reflect the history and culture of students of all backgrounds makes learning history more equitable (Washington, 2018). From the killing of George Floyd to the storming of the Capitol building, recent events have prompted us to rethink the content of the lessons we teach (Teachwire, n.d.).

Conway (2015) posits just as there are different memories from different people, there are different views and perspectives of history, allowing for a teacher or instructor to teach history from different perspectives, possibly perspectives that are more relevant to the diverse group of students in one class. History instructors are often advised to teach history in an unbiased perspective, but Conway (2015) believes teaching history in a “diplomatic” fashion usually approaches an event from the perspective of white males, which does not acknowledge the diversity of students. Rather than focus on the romanticized version of colonialism, teachers can bring in the horrors of slavery, which allows for a different perspective of colonial history (Teachwire, n.d.). Diversity in curricula is about more than just teaching a full view of history; it is proven to empower students of color and their reliance (Washington, 2018). Teaching history in a more diverse perspective is possible as historians studying the same topic will oftentimes draw different interpretations depending on the sources they draw from (Conway, 2015). As the demographics of the United States shifts, so too must the way history is being taught (Conway, 2015).

Another way to draw students into history is to allow them to research and learn about what interests them. The reason why some adults like history when they are older and out of school when they hated it as students is because they can choose to read about what interests them, rather than being forced to read about things their teachers told them to read about (Milo, 2017). The penultimate goal of social studies (history) is to help encourage students to participate as citizens and the way to do that is to allow students to do research on topics that interest them and become experts on their chosen field (Milo, 2017). This would allow for the students to relate and connect with their topics, which is very important in critically

understanding a historical topic and event. If students choose, they can read texts written by members of ethnic groups that are underrepresented in school curricula, which improves the self-esteem of students of that ethnic group, and it will cause all students to have a greater appreciation for cultural differences (Washington, 2018). Hopefully, this will not only encourage them to be better citizens, but also more empathetic to others as well.

Relevance of History to Students

Educational Focus and Funding

This section of the literature review focuses on why the study of history is relevant for students and why they should see the discipline as useful. A lot of focus on the previous section was on the problems of history education in relation to the ways history has been taught in schools, but educational institutions cannot solely be blamed for the lack of support for the history discipline. The government also has a hand in minimizing the importance of the field. Even in polarized political climates, both Democratic and Republican administrations in the United States champion the focus on STEM-related studies, calling for public funding focused on hiring math and science teachers (Wexler, 2019), ignoring civics and social sciences. What these administrations fail to realize is that employers want workers with general analytical and problem-solving skills, rather than STEM-specific qualifications (Wexler, 2019). Employers are also looking for strong written and oral communication skills, and history students possess those skills on top of critical thinking (Wexler, 2019). Success often goes to whoever can articulate the most compelling narrative, and history majors learn how to do that (Grossman, 2016). If children and adolescents do not learn about the history and geography of the country in which they live and the larger world around them, they

would have a much harder time making sense of the present (Wexler, 2019). The major irony here is these public governmental entities do not put much value or emphasis on the field of history, but if they want our democratic system of government to survive and flourish, history, geography and civics need to be prioritized (Wexler, 2019), rather than be increasingly marginalized in higher education.

The Connection Between History and Politics

Given the social divide of this country and conflicts among different countries around the world, learning history can be a good way to learn about other cultures and people, and in turn understand the different groups of people living in the United States. In addition to learning about other cultures, students of history are taught something of great value: critical thinking and clear communication skills – qualities history students have because they learn to sift through substantial amounts of information, organize it, and make sense of it (Grossman, 2016). This is a quality which is rarely found in history textbooks and may be one of the main reasons why students fail to find history relevant to their own lives (Gilbert, 1968). Most importantly, in trying to find reasons as to why learning history is so valuable, we need not look very far: Given the current social and political climate of the United States, “We can talk about how fractured our country has become. That our division increases while school kids are taught less and less about our shared history should come as no surprise” (Markowicz, 2017, para. 18). This is especially important in politics and international relations. “Those who do not know our history are much more likely to view our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms with indifference. It is for this reason that free speech is

under attack at so many of our colleges and universities. Forgetting history is forgetting those that fought for America's freedom and liberty" (Brownfeld, 2018, para. 15).

Effects of Pedagogical Approaches on Critical Thinking

In this section, I focused on how pedagogical approaches in teaching history can increase student interest and development of critical thinking skills.

The Pandemic and Online Learning

I cannot write about critical thinking in history education without mentioning COVID-19 and its effect on education and critical thinking. The pandemic has only made the study of history more fraught. Prior to the pandemic, online learning was not seen as successful as in-person instruction. In 2013, San Jose State University had invested in a partnership with Udacity, a company aiming to develop high-quality, low-cost online instruction, but put the project on hold after six months because the success rates of the students in the program was not what SJSU hoped it would be (Rivard, 2013). Seven years later, with the pandemic forcing everyone online for at least one year, students and educators alike got used to the convenience of education in sweatpants, ignoring and voluntarily forgetting the results of the online instruction experimentation. Now, with Pandora's Box open and the option of taking all classes online, educators and students alike believe education online is the same, if not better, than traditional in-person learning, but they are not being honest with what is missing in an online structure versus traditional in-person learning.

In a study conducted prior to the pandemic, "learning gains can be achieved that are comparable to face-to-face versions of the (history) course, student satisfaction was lower" (Buchanan & Palmer, 2017, p. 85) even when the activity in the class was specifically

created to engage students in the online course. The student-to-student interaction “may be negligible in online course settings” (Kuo et al., 2014, p. 35). Part of the point of being in class is to learn from other students’ different perspectives, and it would seem that online instruction reduces that to some extent.

In addition, online courses have a higher dropout rate than traditional in-person classes (McLaren, 2004; Carr, 2000). Students tend to believe online classes are easier than traditional classes but find out quickly that being online requires “students to be self-responsible, self-motivated, and able to communicate with teachers and other students through the Internet” (Isman et al., 2010). Due to these obstacles, online classes can also be very isolating and difficult for many students. Given these findings, it would not be far-fetched to conclude that being forced to migrate online has further diminished the importance of history. As a personal experience, a former student told me he would rather take STEM courses in-person and take a class that he “doesn’t really care about, like history, online” because he does not need to learn or retain history outside of fulfilling a general education requirement.

Not Focusing in History in Education

Educational institutions, the source for providing history education, also fail in supporting the value and importance of history. Eighty-eight percent of elementary school teachers considered teaching history a low priority (Markowicz, 2017). Their reasoning behind not focusing their curriculum on teaching history is because students are not tested on the subject at the state level, where the main focus is on math and English (Markowicz, 2017). Some high schools in North Carolina have proposed changing their curriculum so that

history is taught only from 1877 onward (Brownfeld, 2018). Furthermore, in May 2018, the College Board unveiled its plan to change the World History Advanced Placement Exam by limiting the range of its subject matter from only 1450 to the present, which removes over 9,000 years of history from topics such as Confucianism to the expansion of West African Kingdoms (Washington, 2018). Additionally, colleges such as Stanford University do not require Western Civilization classes (Brownfeld, 2018). How then, can students develop an interest in history if there are multiple hurdles in the way of students even getting familiar with the subject? Wexler (2019) believes there is a mistaken belief that students are not interested in history or that it is not that important, but in reality, it is because they have very little chance of getting exposed to it in school, which is a very optimistic view of the issue. The overall lack of funding for history departments at the higher education level also contributes to this lack of student interest in history.

History and Critical Thinking

Learning online for the past couple of years has created another problem: With the internet at our fingertips and readily available when we are taking classes online, it becomes the main source of communication and education. Students have gotten used to doing their research and getting their information on the internet. Social media is known for increasing the spread of false information (Emanuelson, 2018). The study of history combats false information by teaching students to critically think about the sources and information they are reading. McLaughlin and McGill (2017) found that students in history classes were most effective in facilitating critical thinking between history and psychology and enhances learners' abilities to decipher between what is true and false, which is important in the age of

alternative facts. “The growing prevalence of ‘fake news’ necessitates enhanced tools of detection and evaluation to handle it, while ‘alternative facts’ place a spotlight on fact checking. Both are traditional skills taught by history educators” (Siebörger, 2017, para. 1). The critical thinking skills learned in history courses gives students a built-in “BS detector” and helps them question the validity of statements or assertions. Learning a variety of perspectives and different stories allows students to get a better sense of reality rather than opinion or misinformation. Learning many different types of history allows students to be able to analyze new information, as simple words can trigger a host of associations (Wexler, 2019). These skills are invaluable for a multitude of occupations and are critical for students to achieve a wider understanding of issues and events on a broader scale.

Gaps in Literature

Based on my analysis of the literature, there is a need for more student-centered feedback as most of the literature was based on the educator’s analyses. This specific study focused on the responses of students to find out their viewpoints on how history could become more engaging and relevant. The study also asked the students to reflect on their experiences of critical thinking as it relates to both inside and outside their history education.

In addition, the reviewed literature did not mention how backgrounds and lived experiences of history educators could affect the way they teach history. Cultural, racial/ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds of educators may affect the way they chose which topics to emphasize and cover in their courses, which may have led to curricula that could have either excited or detracted students from learning history. Another aspect of history educators that I was curious about and was not mentioned in the literature is whether

someone who has an actual degree in history can engage students better compared to an educator who has a degree in another field but ended up teaching history instead. Additionally, having an educator who truly cared about the subject could do wonders for increasing interest and knowledge of history for students. All of the above pertains specifically to characteristics of the history educator, rather than methods used to engage students. As an educator, I feel the characteristics of an educator can make a difference, whether it be good or bad. This was evident when 85% (17 of 20) of my focus group participants mentioned the characteristics of teachers in their schooling experience during this research did affect their education.

Summary

History has been a discipline that many people struggle with at all stages of education in the United States. The most common response is because it is boring. It seems boring to some because it is not relatable nor relevant to anything in their everyday lives, but the problem is they do not see that it actually is relevant and relatable. The people who do not see this, do not see or understand how people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds all have ended up in one country. Without the understanding of how and why this contributes to the issues we have in this country related to race relations, and how each group treats one another is one way to get students more interested in history and have it be more relevant to them, but these issues are not what many teachers focus on when they are trying to figure out why students are not connecting with history. This was evident when Cote (2017) and Perrotta and Bohan (2013) did their studies with their students to try to increase student engagement. Both studies centered on adding different strategies on how to encourage more

student participation but neither focused on the content of their classes and how it could be delivered. They knew there was a problem but did not know exactly how to solve that problem. Rather than changing the content itself, they instead added more work to an already boring topic to many students.

Although educational institutions, government, and some students have given up on history, it is a discipline that is important to our own governmental democratic institution. It should be a discipline that is promoted just as much as the STEM-related fields because it teaches us how to critically think and analyze. It matters that students learn history because it gives students perspective and a worldview that is more than their own environment. It also helps to process human behaviors and actions. If we can see the patterns of the past, we can somewhat understand current and possibly predict human behaviors.

The way teachers and instructors teach history is very important to how students view the subject. Teaching history from a diverse perspective is something that many teachers and instructors do not think about but could be the solution to the problem of why students believe history is boring. Students need to be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum to relate to it. Seeing how the United States has become increasingly more diverse as time passes, it would be wise to revise history curricula to be inclusionary, rather than exclusionary. In addition to making history curriculum more diverse, teachers and instructors can teach history like telling a story or a synopsis of a movie, including all the “behind the scenes drama” because who does not like juicy drama? It is a mistake to believe that all history is boring because it can be interesting if taught in a manner that incites student interest.

Chapter 3 clarifies the research methods in this study. It includes a description and justification of the research design, population and sample, instrument development and validation, data collection, and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Overview

This chapter describes the methods and procedures that I used in this research study. The chapter includes the following sections: purpose, research questions, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, field test procedures, data collection procedures, issues of validity, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

This dissertation study sought to understand how students (a) experienced the subject of history, (b) reflected on the relevance of history, (c) described their engagement in history classes, (d) evaluated historical content, and how they reflected on these topics. This study also obtained students' feedback about how instructors can make history more engaging and relevant. This study addressed the following research questions:

- According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more relevant?
- According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more engaging?
- In an era of alternative facts, how do students evaluate or think critically about historical content (topics/content/perspective)?

Research Design

This was a qualitative study that employed a phenomenological research design. According to Creswell (2014) a phenomenological approach utilizes the lived experiences of participants as data, which are then organized and analyzed. The method in which I used to

gather my data was focus group interviews, which relied on the experiences of the participants.

Demographic Characteristics

The students who were selected for interviews were 18 years old or older at the time of the interview. I solicited participants from history courses that I have taught at in a community college located in the Bay Area of California. The students' demographics of that college are as follows: The college has a total student population of 16,414; with a gender distribution of 49.58% male, 48.39% female, 0.96% non-binary, and 1.07% unknown (CCCCO, 2023). Ethnic demographics are as follows: Asian: 36.21%; Filipino: 5.37%; Hispanic: 27.63%; White: 17.42%; Two or more: 5.34%; Black/African American: 2.72%; Unknown: 4.7%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.44%; American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.15%.

Sample and Selection Criteria

The potential sample of interest for soliciting students to interview was approximately 150-200 currently and formerly enrolled in college level history courses from a Bay Area community college institution. The expected response rate was about 10-15% (15-22 students). The population was taken from approximately thirty students enrolled in each class from my history courses from the school year starting Fall 2022 to Summer 2023, for a total of 8 classes. I reached out to students via class rosters, in which I had access through August 2023. I solicited participation from 15-21 students that were divided into focus groups of 3-7 for a one-hour recorded Zoom interview. I provided a \$5 Amazon gift card to students who participated in the focus group interviews.

Those who responded to my email expressing interest were asked to choose from three available time slots for when interviews took place. Due to scheduling conflicts and accommodation of schedules, there were a total of five focus groups. No student under the age of 18-years-old was contacted to participate in the study. Students who were enrolled in my Fall 2023 courses were not eligible to participate in the focus group interviews, as interviewing students who were currently enrolled would have been a conflict of interest. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees, and the description of the community college from which they were from were vague and unidentifiable.

1. Selection criteria for participants:
 - a. Previously or currently enrolled in a history course at a community college.
 - b. Must be older than 18-years-old.
2. Recruitment of participants:
 - a. Having access to the rosters of all classes I have taught, I emailed students who were enrolled in my classes from Fall 2022 to Summer 2023 to solicit participation.

Sample Profile

Twenty-three students responded to my email expressing interest in participating in this study. The actual number of students who participated in the focus group interviews was 20, which was a sample size of about 10% which was approved by my dissertation chair. When responding to the interview questions, students included examples from their experiences in history classes from elementary school through college, including their experiences with me

as their instructor (see Appendix A. Although not part of the interview questions, many of them compared their experiences in my history course with other history courses they have taken.

In this study, 20 students participated in five focus group interviews. Two of the twenty students (River and Casey) from one focus group participated again in another focus group because the initial group had too many participants that made it difficult for everyone to have an equal amount of time to share. Prior to the interview, all twenty students were asked to fill out a voluntary anonymous information survey that consisted of questions related to gender, race/ethnicity identity, and financial aid status. Eighteen of the twenty total participants responded to the survey.

Figure 1 shows the gender breakdown of the respondents. Fifty percent (9 of 18) of those who responded to the survey identified as female, 44.4% (8 of 18) identified as male, and 5.6% (1 of 18) identified as X.

As shown in Figure 2, Asian and white students were the two highest represented groups, but there were also Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American student populations represented in the sample group. A small number of the students identified as multi-racial/ethnic. Some of the students marked multiple categories due to their multiracial background.

Figure 1.

Gender breakdown of focus group participants. Eighteen of 20 participants responded to the survey.

What is your gender identity?

18 responses

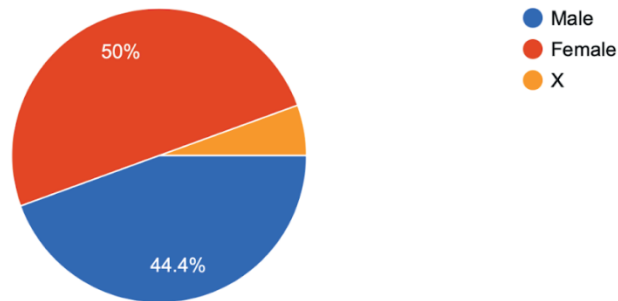
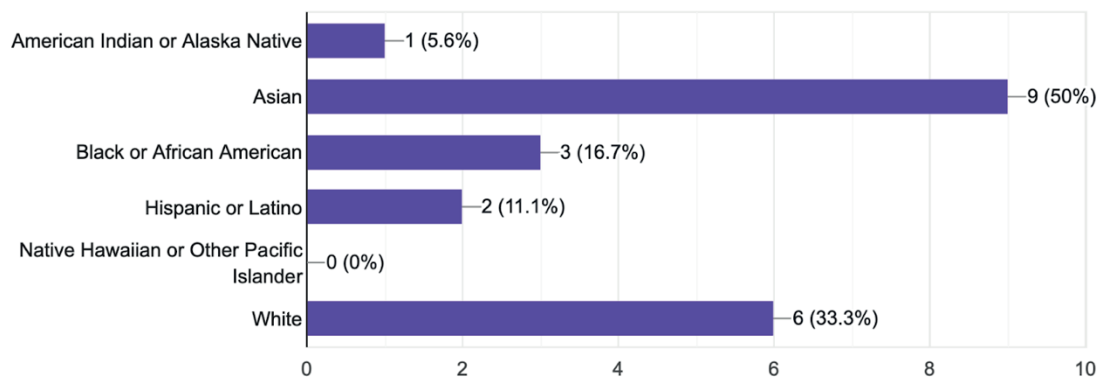


Figure 2.

Ethnic/racial breakdown of focus group participants. Eighteen of 20 participants responded to the survey. Some were multiracial, selecting more than one category.

What is your racial and/or ethnic category? (Check all that apply)

18 responses



An additional email was sent individually to each participant asking for gender identification. Out of the twenty participants, nine responded. The eleven students who did

not respond were assigned androgynous pseudonyms and pronouns in the data in this chapter. The nine who did respond were assigned names and pronouns aligned with their gender identification.

Data Collection

The data collection process that was used to answer RQ 1, RQ 2, and RQ3 was the same. Instruments used were focus group (3-7 participants) interviews that were conducted to probe deeper into the themes of the interview questions that were generated between my dissertation chair and me. The procedures were (a) established content validity of the interview questions, (b) solicited student participation from classes I have previously taught, (b) scheduled interview appointments via Zoom with those who had responded, (c) recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants, and (d) coded and charted responses from participants to find themes that emerged.

Participants

Each focus group interview lasted on average one hour. The first interview consisted of five students, the second seven, the third four, the fourth three, and the last interview consisted of three students, two of whom were already interviewed in group three. Students generally agreed with one another during the interviews. Interview two consisted of the most students (7), where one student talked quite a lot during the interview, not allowing equal time to the other participants in an already large focus group.

Data Sources

I employed focus group interviews to gather my data. The advantage of doing focus group interviews is that they “often produce rich data” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.705). An

open-ended interview schedule was used to gather data from current and former students who have taken history courses at the college level. Subjects were interviewed in focus groups of 3-7 to get an understanding of their perspectives in learning history.

Data gathering took place from September 2023 to October 2023. All data was read through and coded by hand. From there, themes and descriptions emerged, and I had to figure out whether there were interrelating themes and descriptions to interpret the meanings of the themes and descriptions. All these steps had to be validated for accuracy of information, which was done with my committee members.

Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research: Trustworthiness

The four criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981). The *credibility* of the interview protocol was established by asking the dissertation committee to confirm the items. They also suggested additional items and edits to existing items; however, the interview protocol items had already been tested on two of my former students prior to conducting the study. I also used triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the research by the literature review, the interview responses, and my personal knowledge of the students in my focus groups as all of them had previously taken classes with me, which gave me a better understanding of their dialog, communication, and references.

The *transferability* of the responses were established in consultation with my dissertation chair and multiple reviews of the transcripts:

1. I read through the initial raw transcripts of the interviews.
2. I edited the transcripts for format.

3. I watched the interviews again with the transcripts to verify accuracy.
4. I coded the transcripts the first time.
5. I went over the transcripts again two more times to verify my coding.
6. I consulted my committee members on the coding and themes.

Rather than using software to code the transcripts, I did everything manually to ensure a more active approach when reading my data to code the transcripts. The *dependability* of the research relied on the use of focus groups, where there were multiple participants for more responses. Additionally, I conducted five focus groups in total. *Confirmability* of my research was done through committee members reviewing the interview protocol and questions and removing some items to confirm objectivity and relevance to my RQs.

Data Analysis

This research was qualitative in nature, and grounded theory methods were used to analyze the data from the interview responses. The reason for using grounded theory in this research was because it allowed me to capture as much of the complexities in the responses as possible (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I used grounded theory to analyze the responses from the interview by content coding and looking for themes and patterns in student responses. The three coding procedures that were used to analyze the data are open, axial, and selective. The grounded theory approach used in my data collection and analysis process is as follows:

1. I determined the three RQs.
2. I recruited and collected the data by contacting my students and conducting focus group interviews. (Theoretical sampling)

3. Taking the raw transcripts from Zoom, I edited and cleaned up the texts, breaking them up into excerpts. (Open coding)
4. I then grouped the excerpts into codes by highlighting and color-coding the texts. (Open coding)
5. I then added the color-coded texts into a spreadsheet with initial themes. (Axial coding)
6. I repeated the steps until I found saturation of the themes.

Limitations

My ability to solicit participants for the interviews were limited to the one community college in which I was employed when I conducted the study, and I solicited participants who were known to me as they were all my former students. Although the student participants were not enrolled in my classes at the time of the interviews so that they would not feel pressured into answering in a way that would affect their grades, we knew each other, and some of the participants in certain focus groups had taken class together previously. All participants were enrolled in my classes at least one prior academic term, eight of them were enrolled in two of my classes in terms prior to the time of the interview. I generally had positive relationships with all my participants, which could have affected the way they answered the questions. The demographics of these students are highly diverse and urban, which do not represent the population of all community college students in California or the United States. The analysis depended on 20 students who responded and participated in the interview, which was about 10% of the total number of students that were initially solicited for participation and was approved by the chair of my committee.

Chapter 4: Findings of the Study

In this chapter I provide the data I collected in this study from the five focus group interviews. Findings are presented for each of the three RQs below.

1. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more relevant?
2. According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more engaging?
3. In an era of alternative facts, how do students evaluate or think critically about historical content (topics/content/perspective)?

Participants

From my class rosters, I sent emails to all students who were enrolled in my history courses in academic year 2022-2023 and Summer 2023 to solicit participation for my study, which was about 200 different students. I had taught four different history courses in eight sections during the academic year. Some of the students enrolled in multiple history courses taught by me throughout the academic year and received multiple emails of solicitation.

The students who participated in this study are known to me because they had taken at least one history course with me during the 2022-2023 academic year. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), as the interviewer, I needed to balance my role between interviewer and moderator and to make sure that one person would not dominate the group, and I should encourage the ones who were not dominant to participate. I did not believe this task would have been something difficult for me to do due to the fact that it is part of my job as an instructor and the students and I know each other; however, during one of the focus groups,

one person did dominate the conversation, and it became difficult to give everyone in the group equal time to speak.

Overview of Findings

The major themes that emerged to answer my three research questions are as follows (see Appendix B):

1. Ninety-five percent of the participants (19 of 20 students) claimed listening to other classmates' perspectives in class, which may or may not relate with their own perceptions and ideas on different topics helped them learn history better.
2. Ninety-five percent of the participants (19 of 20) mentioned engagement and discussion, where group interaction and discussion on historical topics and current events with classmates helped them engage in the topic.
3. Ninety-five percent of the participants (19 of 20) mentioned relevancy/relatability: Connecting historical topics and events to current events or relevant topics or examples that students can relate to and identify with, such as cultural, social, economic, etc.
4. Eighty-five percent of the participants (17 of 20) thought that teacher/instructor passion/engagement helped them connect to history such as the interest the teacher/instructor shows in teaching the subject and the ability of the teacher/instructor to engage with the students.
5. Eighty percent of the participants (16 of 20) mentioned quality of assignments: Having assignments that are purposeful and useful to students in learning and

- retaining the information, versus the simple “read the book and answer the questions” kind of assignments that do not aid in their learning, but rather simply take up time.
6. Sixty percent of the participants (12 of 20) mentioned the importance of modality history class is delivered in face-to-face in-class instruction, hybrid – combination of in-person instruction and online assignments, and online – strictly online format. Most agreed that they prefer history instruction to be in-person over the online format.
 7. Sixty percent of the participants (12 of 20) mentioned the narrative/counter-narrative of historical topics and events: The perspective in which history is taught: ie. “American exceptionalism”, which is a pro-U.S. attitude and ignores some human rights violations and mistakes that have been committed by the United States versus a narrative that is either more neutral or critical of U.S. policies, and the narrative of marginalized people.
 8. Fifty-five percent of the participants (11 of 20) mentioned the deeper meaning or interpretation/analysis behind historical events: Questioning the thought process, meanings, and intentions of political decisions and actions and the consequences of those decisions.
 9. Fifty percent of the participants (10 of 20) mentioned the use of supplemental material in history courses: The use of supplemental material for course content, such as documentaries may aid in students learning and retaining the material and student-interest in the topic.

While some themes overlapped and answered multiple research questions, I assigned the themes to the appropriate research questions they answered directly. RQ1 had three major themes, namely: Relevance/Relatability, Quality of Assignments, and Supplemental Materials. RQ2 also had three major themes, as follows: Teacher/instructor passion, discussions with classmates, and listening to classmates' perspectives. RQ3 had two major themes that emerged, namely narrative and the deeper meaning/historical analysis/interpretation of political actions/events.

Presentation of the Data

RQ1: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Relevant?

The three themes that emerged during our conversation about relevancy were relevance/relatability, quality of assignments, and supplemental materials.

Theme 1: Relevance/Relatability (95%; 19 of 20 Students). In analyzing students' themes, relevancy and reliability stood out. About 95% of the students mentioned relevance and relatability in their responses. The participants shared that when historical topics are covered so that the material relates directly to them, they felt the content was more meaningful. When content is relevant in this way, students felt the content was familiar, something they understood and something they could identify with in their own experiences. The relatability and relevance to their personal reality helped to make history classes meaningful to them.

In the sections below, I highlight some of these ways students experienced this aspect of relevancy and relatability. The subthemes that emerged were: *Connecting Past and Present*

Events, Relating to Contemporary Popular Culture, Moving Beyond Mere Rote Learning, Using an Identity Lens to Help Students Learn More About Themselves and Their Cultures, and Topics that Matter.

Connecting Past and Present Events. Ninety-five percent or 19 of 20 students felt that the connection to both past and present would need to be made in order to make history class relevant to them. For instance, Kaylee described below similarities between past issues and today's issues, which helped establish connections between two historical events:

In the nineties, when we saw that wave of Civil Rights, and also during the Civil Rights Movement (of the 1960s) itself. I think there's this new wave that's coming from the protests, especially like what we saw during BLM (Black Lives Matter). When I took your class, I was able to understand just so much more about what's going on today, and just make a lot more connections. Not only that, but just be like, 'Oh, this is history repeating itself'. This is not a new phenomenon.

Here, Kaylee explained the importance of understanding historical context and patterns to make sense of current events, such as the connection between the BLM movement and the Civil Rights movement. She was able to see how these movements are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a larger pattern of social change and resistance. By recognizing these patterns, students can gain a deeper understanding of contemporary issues and work towards creating a better society.

Connecting Events to Current Popular Culture. Thirty percent of the students also noted how connecting what they learned in their history class to contemporary popular culture increased relevance. Pedagogically, as an instructor, I purposefully bring in pop culture and students notice and appreciate it. For instance, Kaylee said, "*Your class felt like I was learning about 'U.S. history, Real Housewives' version versus like reading a textbook and*

learning and reading fact after fact.” Kaylee was not alone. The majority of students in the sample expressed that this style of learning helped them retain and understand the information better. Because history was presented to them in a way that aligned with events that they were familiar with, it caught their attention.

Following, Mark also said:

I would say when it comes to relating the past to the present, I've only noticed that most in your course, whereas in other history classes, it's just really dry. And professors don't use current examples to create that relatability for students to understand. Honestly, that was out of all my college experience. And I've attended multiple colleges. You're the only professor who has done that, and I've only had one at [names out of State University], and that was World Religion, and he did use some examples comparing government politics to today and what's going on, but it still wasn't as enjoyable of relating like how you used more fun and exciting things.

Mark emphasized that he had attended multiple colleges. From this broad collegiate experience, he has had only had a couple of instructors who used popular culture to make the course content relevant. Overall, his experiences in the classroom were “really dry.” Faculty are competing for student interest with social media and many artifacts of popular culture that are fun and exciting. Students reflect this dissonance between their schooling and what peaks their interest. Below, I discuss other ways students voice their opinions about relevancy and relatability.

Moving Beyond Mere Rote Learning. Similarly to what Mark stated above, Eric noted the need to model a style of teaching history that would be more relevant for students:

History teachers can do a better job tying it together and look at the bigger picture, and get students engaged instead of just remembering facts and dates. Instead of asking students just to memorize the first 3 presidents and vice presidents, or when was the Declaration signed, they can ask what was the importance of the Declaration signing? What was it based off of? Whom did it discriminate against; who did it provide for?

For Eric, instructors need to prompt students to look beyond the historical facts and connect history in ways that “get them engaged” instead of merely “remembering facts and dates” to help him grasp the events and concepts better. Eric expressed that history teachers should teach more about the “why”, rather than the “what” and “when”, which would ultimately make history more relevant to him and to other students to learn how historical events can be consequential for decisions and situations in the present day. Traditional learning saw students as empty vessels to fill up with knowledge. This new form of pedagogy sees students as active in their learning. And thus, they appreciate content that requires their critical thinking. Later in this chapter, I will dive deeper into the role of critical thinking in the focus groups and classroom. Suffice it to say here, moving towards content that prompts students to think critically helps content to stay relevant and relatable.

Using an Identity Lens to Help Students Learn. Another factor that helps students to relate to historical topics is when they are connected to their identities, which include gender, race/ethnicity, occupation, or life events. For instance, Kaylee below identified a lot with what women had to go through throughout history.

Being a woman, I found a lot of solace in reading history and knowing about women having gone through this kind of stuff for years and years and years. I was able to form an identity through a lot of learning; through learning about the history of women; learning about safety and certain things being realistic about relationships and things like that. I also just knew that I wasn't alone and a lot of things that I went through. And it just built this sense of community in me.

Incorporating the experiences and struggles of women in history courses can empower students such as Kaylee by validating women and their roles in history. Seeing women represented in historical topics can trigger a sense of belonging and self-worth, inspiring

them to pursue more ambitious goals, rather than be relegated to traditional gender roles. Kaylee also talked about how being a psychology major helped her to really connect with women's issues in history, which made history much more relatable: "*There's a lot of psychological aspects in history. And I'm a psych major. So, I focused a lot of that kind of stuff in my paper. And it's just really interesting. I love focusing on the psychological aspects of history because these actions had to have come from something.*" Here, Kaylee has an invested interest in the psychological dimensions of historical events due to her background as a psychology major. She acknowledged the presence of psychological elements within historical narratives, which made the curricula more relevant to her. Similarly, Skylar, who identifies as Salvadorian, talked about how learning more about themselves, their history as an ethnic group, and their culture helped them see the relevance of learning history and encouraged them to "*gravitate to know more.*"

What had me the most engaged was probably learning about where I come from, and how it went and how things went. For me, at least it was ... I don't know. For me, a lot of it was a lot of background that I didn't know, so I guess, probably when you figure out kind of where your people come from, and how things work, and why things work the way they do, it kind of just wants you ... your body and yourself just kind of naturally wants to gravitate to know more.

Skylar described a natural instinct to want to know more about their roots once they started uncovering information about their background. This suggests a deep curiosity and desire for knowledge about one's heritage. Skylar's statement emphasized the importance of personal relevance and connection in history courses to engage students with the subject matter, which will enhance students' interest and motivation to learn history. This can promote a greater appreciation for historical narratives. Six other students felt having this

sense of connection to a historical lesson or topic has allowed them to understand themselves and their identities deeply.

As with Kaylee and Skylar, Jaylen's background affected their connection to the historical context of class. As a military Veteran, Jaylen mentioned that some of the conversations and discussions that revolved around Veterans' experiences in class incited feelings of familiarity:

Every time the military was involved in history or decisions were made and Veterans just sharing their stories, I can really engage in the conversation, really focus in on what they're saying, and respect feelings, whether it was like fear, excitement, horror, or just I don't know, daily, every daily, every day, day-to-day feeling, or something like that.

Jaylen expressed an interest whenever the topic of the military was brought up in history class or when other Vets shared their stories, which is important for students to hear about challenges faced by soldiers during and after their time in the service. Jaylen's interest stemmed from a personal connection to the experiences of those who served, and allowed for them to really engage in the conversations and focus intently on what other Vets are saying. This goes back to the argument that by talking about things that students can relate and connect to their identity in history classes, they can develop a deeper appreciation for the relevance of past events to their own lives and society.

Topics that Matter. Another aspect of relevancy that emerged from students is how important it is to talk about issues and topics that matter to students. Jordan wanted to learn and discuss things that matter to them by emphasizing, "If we're talking about history really being relevant to people in the modern day, we need to talk about highly contested issues that people really care about." Eric believes "there's a real opportunity for history classes to really

encourage students to dig deeper and take a step back and realize what's going on in the world and how it affects them.” Evelyn summed up what the other participants were saying by stating, “What makes for a really relevant history class, as people are saying, is just really connecting (historical facts) to modern events.” And the reason why this is important is captured in the following manner that Kaylee said about *Topics that Matter*:

The whole reason that society is progressing more is that we’re learning. And we’ve seen how things happen and how they can negatively impact the world and (we’re) learning and growing from that. I think learning history is extremely important to building a better, more accepting society in general.

To Kaylee, learning history and the important topics can cultivate a more inclusive society by reflecting on past experiences and acknowledging mistakes. Society can work to build a better, more equitable future if we all strive to be better than we were yesterday. Learning about topics that matter to students can help encourage them to be instruments of change.

Theme 2: Quality of Assignments (80%; 16 of 20 Students). During the conversations with the participants, 80% of the students mentioned that quality of assignments is important in helping them relate to historical topics and retain the information. There is a perception that taking a history class usually entails reading the textbook then answering questions at the end of the chapter, but according to the participants, that does little for the student in terms of actual learning and processing of the material. Evelyn believes this could be rectified by how the assignments are presented:

It really depends on the environment that teachers foster for questions and whether they invite and foster an environment that allows for people to instead of just naming, okay, the Magna Carta happened in 1215 ... cause and consequences. Why? Like, WHY did these things happen?

In focusing on the reasons behind historical events and documents, this made it more meaningful and relevant to Evelyn. She went on to explain that the basis for most current legal codes is based on the Magna Carta. Evelyn seems to value assignments that ask students to think about reasons, like why and how, rather than just learning to memorize the year in which the Magna Carta was written. Assignments that focus on questioning and understanding the deeper context behind historical events can directly influence the quality of those assignments in history classes.

Assignments which challenge students to think about the connections to present-day issues are what make the topics relevant and meaningful. Carly appreciated an assignment that was based on students' analytical skills:

I think you already make it better in class by having a lot of freedom for us to write essays, and I still got a lot of points from you. That encourages (us) to know that we can think whatever we want as long as it's our own thinking. That helped me think more, and without any fear (of point deductions).

To be clear, this student is discussing a high-stakes assignment, in that the assignment is worth a lot of points. However, the student felt she was existing in a low-stakes environment because of the way in which the instructor allowed for student voice. In this assignment, I had asked students to construct an alternative plausible conclusion on the fate of the lost inhabitants of Roanoke Colony by using the evidence from an article the students had to read. In this example, we see that the environment of the class, created by an instructor who routinely supports a context of critical thinking freedom, allowed the student to focus on the process of working through the assignment, deciding “whatever we want” and thus being

able to meet the assignment expectations in a way that reaches the student's potential for quality assignment.

Theme 3: Supplemental Material (50%; 10 of 20 Students). Creative, non-textbook based assignments and materials that teachers and instructors use to get students to connect to history more were mentioned by 50% of all the students who were interviewed. In the conversations the students mentioned being appreciative of materials that help them to relate to and retain historical information better. These materials helped make the material come alive for students.

During my classes, I often mention titles of movies and shows that connect and relate to what I am lecturing in class. Carly mentioned that that was helpful to her and that she *“felt very engaged when Professor mentioned some of the books and movies that we can go check with certain history concepts”*. She looked up some of the material that I mentioned in class to learn more about the topic on her own. Her interest in historical topics increased as a result of what she was assigned in class and other resources that I brought up. In connecting what she was learning in class to other things outside of class, Carly was able to see the relevancy of the topics covered.

Similarly, Kris mentioned how watching documentaries helped to introduce and reinforce the historical topics from the lectures that they had listed to in class:

For once a week we had to watch a video, and that was ridiculously helpful because I would remember it. I would remember parts of the video where you would make that connection back to the videos like, yeah, I do remember that. I do remember these people. I do remember they were doing that. I do remember the jazz, I do.

The “jazz” Kris was referring to was a segment in a documentary that they were assigned to watch about the Roaring Twenties and the popularity of jazz music and culture during that time. I had lectured about the Interwar Years and the cultural shift prior to the Great Depression. Kris was able to relate what I lectured back to what they had seen in the documentary, and the connection enabled them to understand the concepts better.

In the same Focus Group, Jaylen also agreed with Kris and reiterated what Carly said by saying:

Going back to what I said earlier about relating it (the lectures) to like historical movies or or dramas, because I'd say students are really into that. I mean being able to find something that they enjoyed and seeing how that connected to history.

Having supplemental materials and assignments that make the material more easily digestible to students helps them to relate to history better and in turn would make history more enjoyable to them. Jaylen mentioned that they felt especially proud of themselves when they were discussing a recent movie, *Oppenheimer*, with their friends and they knew the backstory and context of the movie due to what they learned in class, which gave them an appreciation of history.

To sum up the themes that connect to RQ1, relevancy/relatability, quality of assignments, and supplemental materials: They all play the part of making historical topics easier to grasp and understand to students. There are ways that students can relate to historical events that happened years, decades, or even centuries ago. As long as methods that center around connecting the material to student experiences and lives are employed in teaching history to students, it can be done if the teacher/instructor chooses to implement these themes into their teaching.

RQ2: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Engaging?

Themes that emerged during our conversation were: teacher/instructor passion, discussions with classmates, listening to classmates' perspectives.

Theme 1: Different Perspectives (95%; 19 of 20 students). During the focus group interviews, all but one student, making that a total of 95% (19 of 20) of the students, mentioned that they were able to listen to different perspectives from their peers in their history courses, and that helped them to evaluate historical perspectives. "Different perspectives" as a theme was also able to answer the RQ3 in terms of critical thinking, but a lot of what the students in the focus groups mentioned was about interacting and engaging with their classmates in a classroom setting. What many of the participants mentioned was that in listening to their classmates' perspectives, which did not always align with what they think or believe themselves, but it allowed for the students to think about whether what they believe is the "right" thing to believe. On the other hand, if their classmates voiced a statement that does align with their own beliefs, it can confirm their thoughts and beliefs as being valid. It is important to have an environment in which there are differing perspectives. Students are helped in their thinking by hearing other perspectives.

Dakota stated:

A real history class is just hearing from all different sides like, not just like one perspective, but like hearing from different perspectives. Because I know in our history class, we had a person who would speak out his opinions, and I feel that kind of helped me, too.

Skylar in Focus Group 3 was in the same class as Dakota in Focus Group 1, and referred to the same student in terms of hearing a different perspective:

I remember we had a certain student that was really ... yeah ... he had different opinions, I would want to say, but I kind of appreciate it in a way, because, you know, sometimes you get stuck in your ways, and you don't want to see a certain way, which is kind of like a bad mindset to have. So, I think you know, hearing other people out and having other opinions makes you really see the whole picture, and probably even better understand what you've already, you know, received.

Although the classmate that both students mentioned seemed to have a perspective and opinions that is not what would be considered “the norm” in terms of political and social views of the student body these students are normally accustomed to, both Dakota and Skylar seem to appreciate listening to a very different perspective. They both examined themselves and their own beliefs a little more after listening to their classmate. Rather than label this classmate as wrong or stupid, they found value in listening to a perspective that is completely different than most other students. The environment in their history class allowed them to be able to engage with one another to learn from each other by listening to others.

More evidence of engaging with classmates and listening to their perspectives came from Taylor, who stated:

There are other classmates who have a good amount of opinions on a subject, (which) could also influence you to be able to go beyond what you think your opinions are on that subject and add onto it. It's also important.

Taylor seems to value engaging with classmates with different opinions because it can shape their own understanding and opinions on a subject. In a history class where the environment was conducive to open discussion and the exchange of ideas that allow for differing viewpoints can broaden a student’s perspective and challenge preconceived notions.

Students who are open to this, will do a self-evaluation to get a better understanding of themselves and the people around them.

River echoed the same sentiment:

Talking to a few of my fellow classmates: They provided me with a completely different viewpoint, and it actually changed my understanding of historical events. I actually learned a bit more – I would say I actually learned more talking to them.

River described how engaging in discussions with classmates provided them with a new perspective leading to a deeper understanding of historical events. Listening to diverse viewpoints is valuable because it challenges students to consider alternative perspectives and think critically about their own beliefs, which allows them to be more open to different ideas.

The engagement and interaction with classmates and listening to their perspectives does seem to help students learn better as 95% of the participants stated this in different ways and used different examples. To sum up, Riley said, “*The stories that everyone was saying really made me more open-minded and made me realize how everyone's experiences are different. Very different.*” This reflects on the impact on hearing other students’ stories, which fosters an appreciation for diverse experiences. The consensus of having people in class that have different experiences and perspectives seems to be that it helps with engagement and also learning.

Theme 2: Engagement and Discussion (95%; 19 of 20). It should be no wonder that for a research question asking about engagement in history classes, almost all participants (95%;) mentioned class discussions and engagement with peers in history classes as a major factor in learning. Cameron stated: “*History curriculum encourages students to ask questions, engaging discussions, and develop critical thinking skills in order to better*

understand history.” According to Cameron, the history classes they had taken prompted curiosity and inquiry, which allowed students to think deeper about historical topics, challenge assumptions, and explore different perspectives through discussions. Supporting this sentiment that discussions with peers matters was Evelyn who said, “*When I actually am having classes where I am interacting with the other classmates, it makes a huge difference in my desire to actually learn*”. This underscores the importance of interactive learning that engages students to actively participate in class discussions. Interaction with other students connects the topic more to students, which allows them to have a broader interpretation of the content.

Jaylen again brings up their experience as a Veteran and how many of their classmates were also Vets made them really engaged in history: “*Like every time the military was involved in history or decisions were made and Veterans just sharing their stories, I can really engage in the conversation, really focus in on what they're saying*” because they were able to relate and hear their classmates engage with the topic and each other. Jaylen had a personal interest and connection to the military because they are a Vet, and they were emotionally invested in the conversations that had other Vets speaking about their experiences. Hearing other Vets speak about their experiences in the service may have evoked feelings of respect and empathy.

Another way students experience engagement in history courses is being able to see and hear what their classmates are doing and saying. Riley stated that in their history class, “*The engagement with everyone was just really fun, and it actually pushed me to study for a test, and all of that because I usually don't*”. It was the discussions that they heard in class that

made their history class a good learning experience for them. Had they not had that interaction with their classmates, they may not have had the initiative to study history on their own.

All in all, 95% of the student participants in the focus group interview did say that there was some level of discussion and engagement in at least one of the history classes that they have taken and that was a positive aspect of the history classes because it did foster engagement through discussions and interactions with classmates. Engagement with classmates seems to foster a better learning environment as it allows for students to be active learners and participants in their education.

Theme 3: Teacher/Instructor Passion or Engagement (85%; 17 of 20). The passion of the teacher or instructor of a history course contributes to the engagement of a history class was mentioned by 85% of the students who were interviewed. The participants voiced how engagement and interest in a class is greatly affected by how the teacher/instructor conducts a class. Kaylee stated:

I think it's important that the teacher likes the job. You know, it's so important that the teacher actually likes the job that they're doing. And they like the subject that they're teaching because being passionate about something that you do just adds so much more, and students can feel that.

She also went on to explain that the teacher's passion encourages students to participate and be more involved and interested in a history class. When a teacher genuinely enjoys what they do, it has a major impact on the learning environment and the students' educational experience. The teacher/instructor's passion for their job and the subject they teach is important and essential to creating a vibrant and effective learning environment.

Eric also supported Kaylee's thoughts on teacher passion as a part of student engagement. He mentioned another history instructor's focus on lives of U.S. presidents and my casual teaching style as examples of different passions that can help student engagement in history:

As long as instructors are able to make it fun and interesting, because I feel like history is just such a broad and vast subject that it's impossible to cover everything, so you kinda just have to pick your lane. And you know some people might not like the way someone went in depth with one U.S. president, and maybe prefer your style. But I mean, I feel like as long as you're trying to make it fun and engaging, that's like the ultimate goal.

According to Eric, it does not matter about the specific passion of a teacher/instructor, but that the teacher needs to be passionate about something and bring that into the classroom. The students put the responsibility in the teacher/instructor's hands of trying to find ways to make history engaging to students. Eric's statement emphasizes the importance of making history education enjoyable and captivating for students. This can be done by selecting engaging topics and using diverse teaching styles, but prioritizing student interest should be the ultimate goal. By encouraging student interest in history, it can cultivate a deeper appreciation for history.

Riley stated how my passion in the class encouraged them to work harder and engage in the subject more:

Someone who's really passionate about what they're doing in teaching like, obviously you were very passionate about it, and it got me interested because of your passion with the subject because usually, while I don't hate history, I never really listened to it. I just read the books after and study by myself, but the whole time in class I was just focusing on you, and I didn't really have to study for quizzes, because I just remembered everything you said. So, it's just definitely like the passion towards the subject.

According to Riley, because of the way I teach, which involves a lot of interaction with the students, actually pushed them to connect and immerse themselves in the topic more. I showed excitement in the subject, which increased their interest in it. Students are savvy and are able to tell if a teacher cares about the topic and it is important to convey that enthusiasm in teaching.

Joshua reinforced this sentiment by relating teacher/instructor passion back to engagement in a history class and how that encourages students to learn:

I feel like the way that you teach, you teach with excitement. And it's like, you love what you're teaching, and you want people to learn it. And I feel like that engagement is very important because it's just like that interaction is important because you got it like, you got that spark that wants (the students) to learn this knowledge.

Joshua emphasizes the importance of teaching with enthusiasm and passion. A teacher/instructor's genuine love for the subject could enhance the learning experience for students, which can motivate students to want to learn more about history. A passionate teacher can create a critical moment in a student's life that matters beyond the individual classroom.

Casey focused on a specific style of teaching in my class. My use of analogies and examples seem to interest the students in what I am teaching: "... Like the storytelling, because I have seen in your class that whatever you teach is like a story," which seems to make it easier for students to follow and be entertained. Tricia goes into more detail about how my style of teaching made it more interesting for her: "You're a very engaging storyteller. I thought that how you tell stories so well and like adding in like, comedy bits like

during them ... This was like super engaging, (and) I was super focused. It was really, really interesting.”

Jaylen summed it up best when they made a statement about how the way I teach was able to get them into the subject of history:

I'd just like to say that throughout all my history classes, this was the first history class where I had my ADHD under control, and not only because, you know, I've been to the military, so I have a lot more discipline, but Professor, you really had me engaged. It was really interesting and fun. Oh, you know. Just glad to be there.

According to the students, in making the students part of the conversation in class, and part of what they are learning, I was able to help create an environment that encouraged them to really get into history. What all these students seem to agree on was the amount of effort the teacher/instructor puts into making a history course exciting and engaging to students will be obvious in the way the students are drawn into the class.

To answer RQ2, in order for history classes to be more engaging, students want to hear different perspectives from their classmates, which also fosters discussion and engagement. They also want a teacher/instructor who encourages engagement by either their personality and passion for the subject and/or also the way they teach and interact with the students to foster that engagement. Empowered teachers empower students.

RQ3: In an Era of Alternative Facts, How Do Students Evaluate or Think Critically About Historical Content (Topics/Content/Perspective)?

When I developed RQ3, instead of asking a general question, “Do history courses help students learn how to critically think?”, I opted for a question that was more specific to the current political climate. Given that we have entered “an era of alternative facts” I wanted my

research to reflect this paradigm shift. While contextually students are immersed in this political moment, my interview questions did not specifically connect back to the “era of alternative facts.” I did, however, get responses on critical thinking as it relates to history courses. Themes that came up during the conversation about critical thinking in history courses were narrative and the deeper meaning/historical interpretation and analysis.

Theme 1: Deeper Meaning/Historical Interpretation/Analysis (55%; 11 of 20 Students). Deeper meaning/historical interpretation for reasons behind political decisions and analyzing the reasons behind these decisions were mentioned by 55% of the participants in the focus groups. What these students mentioned were looking at historical events on a deeper level, rather than just the surface level of things like “read and answer” or memorize dates and facts exercises. Deeper meanings of historical events challenge the students to think and formulate opinions of their own, which all ties into critical thinking.

Eric brings up how current events are connected to past issues, and how he believes it would be beneficial for students to understand the reasons behind present-day conflicts:

You see it nowadays like on the news: “Sorry that we have immigration problems,” or like we have poor relationships with like “said” country. And they don't really give you the historical context like, ‘Well, maybe the reason why we have this poor relationship is because we tried to oust their leader 60 years ago’ and stuff like that.

He pointed out that focusing on just one present-day issue like immigration problems without understanding the reasons why these people are trying to leave their country in the first place does not explain the context of immigration in its entirety. Sometimes history classes mask the role the U.S. plays in causing problems that create the need to leave a country. Rather than connecting all of events to understand the conflict as a whole,

oftentimes, students only know issues on a surface level from what they see in social media or on the news, but if they were to dig deeper into the history of conflicts and issues, they would understand there is more to it than what is being reported.

Mark used his experience as a Veteran to give an example of U.S. foreign policy and the things civilians at home do not know and think about:

I think it would be healthy to add in not only like with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but to also add in motives to learn of the reason other than what they just tell us in the news and the media, but actual how we're (the U.S.) benefiting financially from it, and what other goals of the war are ... I was in Afghanistan. And you see all the BS. You learn all the BS of why we're even there, like for example: I know some soldiers that had to burn down marijuana fields in Afghanistan. But I also know Marines who were protecting poppy fields.

Mark believes it would be beneficial for students learning history to really understand the complicated layers of U.S. history because it is not as simple as black and white or that everything the U.S. does is in the best interest of all people and societies. Like Eric, Mark believes students should be taught these things and really think about what the United States is actually doing in other countries. In so doing, students are evoking a call for a course which allows for counter-narratives.

River also believes that history classes help to

Analyze information, and then make judgments and decisions. And it's taking and assessing different evidence and then perspectives and then giving your own conclusion. So if there's a question like do history classes encourage critical thinking, I would say yes ... I think history really encourages critical thinking.

River also mentioned an assignment from their class in which I asked them to analyze an incident where U.S. soldiers massacred over 500 Vietnamese villagers during the Vietnam War. They related this to critical thinking in that the students had to learn about that event

and think about all the motivations behind that event, and how the U.S. military tried to cover it up. It goes back to what Eric and Mark mentioned, where they appreciate the history courses that talk about these events and really delve deep into the causes and effects of political decisions and military actions. These are the kind of history classes that encourage critical thinking and push for students to understand the deeper meanings of historical events.

Theme 2: Narrative/Counter-Narrative (60%; 12 of 20 Students). The narrative of how history, specifically United States history, is taught was brought up by 60% of the students who participated in the focus group interviews. Many of the students felt that the history that they have been presented growing up portrays the U.S. as the best country in the world, that it is the perfect place to be, and throughout the history of this country, the U.S. made all the perfect decisions and put human rights at the forefront, but that is not actually the case. Counter-narrative focuses on the voices of the marginalized and those who do not hold power, and the students appreciated learning about those perspectives.

Eric voiced the importance of learning different, counter-narratives of history that do not focus on American exceptionalism:

So, I just think those are important things to learn about and to learn about U.S. history, and that we weren't like an isolationist country; that we definitely had our hands in the cookie jar in a bunch of places. And so it's just important to keep that in mind for history classes, I mean, it's good to learn, you know the generic like Washington, and all that stuff, that's fine. But you should also learn what we (the U.S.) were doing in the meantime, with Native Americans and stuff like that as well.

Eric expressed the desire for a more comprehensive approach to teaching history that goes beyond focusing on the achievements of historical figures like George Washington. Eric

believes that there needs to be an emphasis on the broader context of U.S. involvement in global affairs. Eric is wanting a deeper understanding and analysis of history.

Jordan also mentioned topics like Washington and the idea of the “American hero” whom many history teachers/instructors emphasize:

They’ll (history classes) focus a lot on like certain particular people, right? Like, really powerful people, right? Focus on like, you know, this is George Washington or this person, and a lot of it. They’ll focus on maybe the dirtier underbelly a lot of those things, right? Especially when it’s a long time ago, or U.S. history, a lot of it can be pretty nationalistic in some cases.

To these students, the American exceptionalism view is seen as the downside and weaknesses in history courses. River explicitly pointed this out: “*Weaknesses, I would say, that no one talks about you know the controversial issues. And then, because I’ve seen you talking about the controversial issues*”. River expresses that one of the few experiences in history class where they experienced learning about topics that can be more uncomfortable was in the class they took with me. It seems as if other history teachers may try to avoid this, but as educators, these issues should be brought to light so that students can learn from them and not repeat the same mistakes.

Casey provided a possible rationale for avoiding controversial issues: “(Controversial topics in) history may be left out because of sensitivity. I’m not saying that every school or place does this, but I think that would be one of the weaknesses, like there’s censorship and not teaching students how the things actually happened”. Skylar added that this “censorship” starts out at the lower levels of American education of history:

I feel like in elementary school, they do give you a bit of history. I feel like a lot of it isn’t necessarily true because they want to sugarcoat it because you’re young. I think transparency is important. I think not challenging your students is also a bad thing,

because you know, if you give information, they're gonna take it a certain way, instead of saying, 'Hey, you know, you should always think about what is going on instead of just accepting it how it is'. But yeah, I think the biggest thing is just being honest about what truly happened instead of what people want to say happened.

Skylar expressed the importance of honesty and transparency in teaching history. They felt this was important even for younger students because that could lead to misconceptions of historical information and a whitewashing of history. Rather, history educators can empower students to become more informed and engaged about current events.

Kaylee summed up the participants' thoughts on historical narrative by saying:

I think it's important for us kids to learn the true history of the United States. I think every student should learn the true history of the United States. I know that that's an opinion that might not be ... That's not as easy to enforce. But I think it's extremely important for us to start learning the actual history about the United States. Because I didn't (learn about the actual history of the U.S.). I didn't know a lot of this stuff until recently. ... Yeah, the good, the bad, and the ugly. I think it's important to accept all of it, because it's the country that we live in. You know it's really ... I think it's problematic to sweep the bad under the rug. It's like, 'Well, you still did it'.

Kaylee emphasized the need to confront all of U.S. history including positive achievements as well as darker issues. In doing this, students can develop a better understanding of the complexities of U.S. history. In having a more authentic version of history, students can recognize the negative aspects of history and work towards creating a better future for everyone.

The common thread with the two themes (deeper meaning/historical analysis and narrative) for RQ3 is that in order to foster critical thinking in history courses, teachers and instructors need to teach more than just surface level facts and dates. Most of the students mentioned a distaste for an "American exceptionalism" type of history and feel it is more beneficial to them to know the whole truth and facts behind historical topics and events.

Although “different perspectives” as a theme was not included in answering RQ3, listening to different perspectives also plays a big part in helping students to critically think about and question their own beliefs. Knowing the deeper meaning, different narrative and perspectives seems to foster a broader understanding from the students’ perspectives.

Additional Frequently Mentioned Theme

The modality in which history classes are taught were mentioned by 60% (12 of 20) of the students. Given that this research took place not long after the COVID pandemic, this is perhaps not surprising. Because courses collectively moved to online learning during the COVID pandemic, I feel it is important to report students’ thoughts on the topic.

Modality (60%; 12 of 20 Students). The questions that were sent to the participants before the interviews consisted of a set of questions about the modality of history courses that would be asked “If time permits.” In terms of modality, the definition is how the classes are delivered: whether the classes were taught in-person, online, or hybrid. There was not enough time to ask Focus Groups 1 and 2, but the students brought up their experiences with online classes regardless and how they felt it contributed or did not contribute to their learning. Modality was mentioned by 60% (12 of 20) of the students, which is considerable due to the fact that the questions of modality were not officially asked to all participants. Every single Focus Group had at least one student who mentioned class modality.

Evelyn in Focus Group 1 stated, “Online learning for me, like even in courses and topics that I'm very interested in, just felt very dry and dead, I guess”.

Mark in Focus Group 2 believed that “in-person's always better than online. And that's from all my experience, almost every class, because there's more engagement between the students (in in-person classes).”

Skylar in Focus Group 3 compared their experiences between taking in-person versus online classes: “In-person (classes) does I think, engage you more. I think it might be a little bit more difficult, since you have to, you know, show up, do more critical thinking. But I think it does make the class easier in the other way that you actually can absorb the knowledge way more”.

Kris in Focus Group 4 was very opinionated about modality: “The online form, it just doesn't work, in my opinion. I think it holds really almost no value. You're not gonna retain any of it. You're not gonna learn from it. You're just taking it to click through and then say you did it”.

Joshua in Focus Group 5 believed “*you have more distractions outside of a classroom*”, meaning online classes. He felt he could engage in in-person interactions better while in class than he did in an online class.

To sum this up, almost all of the students who did mention something about class modality, overwhelmingly believe online classes are subpar to in-person classes. This information can be very useful coming out of the pandemic when most people, instructors and students alike, are used to the online format and are hesitant to come back to in-person instruction. The relationship to history education is students are not getting as much value from history courses online as they and the instructors think they are.

Summary

There were nine main themes that emerged as I was analyzing the data from the focus groups interview. These nine themes all were mentioned by at least 50% of the students who participated in the interviews. There were nine key findings from the focus group interviews, eight of the findings were used to answer the three research questions, and one additional key finding was mentioned frequently by the participants on the modality in which they preferred their history courses to be delivered. The RQs and the respective findings are as follows:

RQ1: According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more relevant? Three themes emerged:

Relevancy/relatability, quality of assignments, and supplemental materials.

RQ2: According to students who have taken a general education history course, in what ways can history classes become more engaging? Three themes emerged: Different perspectives, engagement and discussions, and teacher/instructor passion.

RQ3: In an era of alternative facts, how do students evaluate or think critically about historical content (topics/content/perspective)? Two themes emerged: Deeper meaning/historical analysis, narrative/counter-narrative of historical topics, and a subtheme of listening to different perspectives.

Another theme that aided in answering the three RQs was the modality in which history courses are taught. Thinking deeply, the commonality between all the themes is the students' desire to have interactions with the teacher and their classmates on some level, and they learn history better by comparing what they are listening to in classes to what they already know and believe. Additionally, according to the students, in order to have a history course that is

relevant, encourages engagement, and critical thinking, it is better that the classes be taught in an in-person setting. All of the themes mentioned in RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 in some respects require interaction with classmates and the teacher/instructor. It seems that this can best be achieved through in-person instruction. The themes mentioned above will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter includes my analysis of the findings from Chapter IV, which emerged from the focus group interviews. I also include recommendations for further research, especially suggestions for history educators. I divided the chapter up into sections based on the three research questions. In each section, I tied the conclusions back to the literature review and conceptual framework and included a discussion about the findings. I added in a section for a separate finding, Modality, because this conclusion connects all three RQs with the responses. After the discussion of the findings of each RQ, I made recommendations for future research and studies.

Discussion

RQ1: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Relevant?

There were three findings for RQ1: Relevancy/relatability, quality of assignments, and supplemental materials.

Relevancy/Relatability. In answering RQ1, students had a better connection with their history courses if they learned from curricula that reinforced their identities (Washington, 2018). Kaylee, Skylar, and Jaylen all gave examples of their experiences with this in their responses. As a woman, Kaylee felt a connection to history that represented women's issues; Skylar, being Salvadorian expressed their yearning to know more about where they come from; and Jaylen, who has a military background felt connected to their history course when the conversation revolved around military personnel. In order for students to feel connected

to historical topics, history educators should work to make lessons and examples relatable to students. This could be done by keeping current with student interests and events that are important to them. In order for history to be relevant to students, the way in which the content is delivered needs to be tied back to the students somehow, and it is the responsibility of the educator to do this.

Quality of Assignments. Assignments feel like “busy work” when they take up time with no real return (Milo, 2017). History teachers/instructors struggle with creating assignments that work, and students want assignments that are engaging and help them learn history (Perrotta & Bohan, 2013). Students spoke a lot about the assignments that caught their attention. Many of these examples were assignments that allowed them freedom and agency in deciding at least some part of the assignment response. They also appreciated when history was compared to popular culture and they could use their assignment to analyze this reflection. In sum, students want assignments that engage them and encourage them to get interested in a historical topic.

Supplemental Materials. Milo (2017) mentions a multitude of supplemental materials other than textbooks that can be used to aid students in their learning of history, such as movies, going on trips, watching presentations or performances. Half of the students who were interviewed mentioned using supplemental materials helped them to retain historical information or even get interested in it. Jaylen had mentioned watching the movie *Oppenheimer* then having a sense of pride because they knew a lot of the underlying context in the movie because we had talked about some of those issues in history class. Kris also emphasized watching documentaries in class helped them to connect those documentaries to

the lectures in class. Joshua also talked about watching documentaries on his own to further his knowledge and interest with historical topics.

After teaching history for eight years, the familiar story is that students come into my class on the first day of the term having a dread of history, and the obligation of taking history class being a huge obstacle for them to graduate. Students feel history is not relevant to them because it is about a bunch of old dead people (Milo, 2017). When history teachers/instructors employ methods to highlight the *relevancy*, students feel more connected to the subject. It was obviously very important for the students to see how history connects to them. They want that *relatability*. From my findings, students emphasize that can be done by the instructor being cognizant of current events, pop culture, important issues of the day, etc., and bringing in that awareness to the classroom for the students. This staying tuned not only makes the content more relevant to the students, it also helps the instructor be more relatable to the students.

Further, centering assignments that are worthwhile for student-learning, rather than busy work can really help students to see the relevancy of history curricula. As demonstrated by my focus groups, students are savvy. They see through assignments and can tell when they are busy work. Students overwhelmingly want *quality assignments* that give them latitude to think about topics that are important to them and that challenge them to produce outputs that are beyond regurgitation. The assignments should aid students in thinking about historical topics, rather than simply memorizing facts. This could be encouraged by using materials that are familiar to students. All of this goes back to how history can be relevant to students.

There are many ways to do this, and it should be something teachers/instructors are aware of and utilize tools to make it relevant.

Finally, students highlighted the importance of *supplementary materials*. Textbook-only curricula are not creative enough to gain students' interest. Students shared that they responded well to the curricular materials I brought in that broadened their awareness of historical material in platforms they were already using. I used YouTube, Netflix, and other social media sites to play documentaries for the students. Students loved being able to view these artifacts through a historical analysis. While not surprising that students appreciate film in their college courses, a latent goal of bringing in this medium is to encourage their interest in documentaries. Supplemental materials can be a bridge from their classroom lives to their non-classroom lives. Supplemental materials and quality assignments should be used to reinforce historical content for students.

RQ2: According to Students Who Have Taken a General Education History Course, in What Ways Can History Classes Become More Engaging?

There were three findings for RQ2: Teacher/instructor passion, discussions with classmates, and listening to different perspectives.

Teacher/Instructor Passion. Milo (2017) writes extensively about different methods teachers use to teach history better. One of the methods to encourage engagement in history courses is making a connection with the material to personal stories (Milo, 2017), whether that be the teacher/instructor's personal story, or someone else's, but that is one of the ways students can engage better in history courses. This was evident in the responses of the students, where 85% (17 of 20) mentioned they wanted to feel passion and interest from the

teacher/instructor, whether it be with the subject or with the students, to feel more engaged in the course. River and Casey from focus groups 2 and 5 mentioned specifically that when they had experiences with a teacher/instructor who told stories of personal experiences in a historical aspect, which made them feel the teacher's personal connection and passion with the topics, and helps the students understand experiences in historical events on a personal level.

Discussions with Classmates. It should be no surprise that students feel having discussions with their classmates was one aspect that encouraged engagement. In order to have engagement in a class, regardless of subject, some sort of interaction needs to take place, and group discussions on the course material would improve engagement (Perrotta & Bohan, 2013). Engagement through discussion can facilitate communication and a deeper understanding of historical topics. Students love discussing with each other. They even appreciate hearing from students they do not agree with. The material comes alive when they can discuss it with each other.

Listening to Different Perspectives. This was one of the most frequently mentioned themes during the focus group interviews. Listening to different perspectives was mentioned by 95% (19 of 20) of the students. One of the students specifically mentioned he values the perspective of international students because their interpretation of U.S. history is often different from how Americans usually view it. Having different perspectives creates a globalized context of U.S. history, which helps the students learn with a broader worldview (Teachwire, n.d.). Listening to different perspectives of history can offer different

interpretations of historical context (Conway, 2015), which can help students learn from one another.

In answering RQ2, there are many ways to make history classes more engaging. One of the worst things in a history class is when the teacher or instructor does not know how to engage the students. A lot of students are already coming into a history class thinking that it is going to be boring, but rather than confirm that, it should be the history teacher/instructor's job to find ways to engage the students. Whether it be talking about topics and relating it back to what the students know or getting the students to participate and talk to the teacher/instructor and/or their classmates, the teacher needs to find a way to entice the interest of students. I do believe that history teachers should be aware of the hesitation and anxiety many students have when coming into a history class. I think creating engagement in a history class is the main responsibility of the teacher/instructor because students who are able to be actively involved in their learning will be able to learn the material better. Teachers need to find a way to make these "old dead people" come alive again and be relevant. Being passionate about the topic and understanding how to connect that to students in the present settings can go a long way in creating an environment where history is enjoyable to students. Based on my experience, having fun with the topic and including the students in that fun helps to really give the students a sense of enjoyment and interest in history.

History teachers/instructors should find ways to initiate dialog with students and also between students to encourage meaningful discussions. It is not enough to have an open class discussion or a lecture with questions. Instructors who want students to be engaged must

allow for conversation among students. I cannot stress enough how important setting time aside for students to discuss the material with their peers is. When peer-to-peer discussions happen, students listen to each other's different perspectives. As a history instructor who teaches to very diverse groups of students, when students talk about their experiences and perspectives, *discussions with classmates* help everyone learn - not just the students, but also me, as their instructor.

Students highlighted that this form of classroom organization causes them to hear different perspectives, which helps them learn in different ways. It can increase engagement as students are learning and asking each other questions about their experiences, it increases curiosity and interaction among students, and it gives students a better understanding of different topics due to the different perspectives. Instructors could help to facilitate this by creating that environment that helps students to interact and learn from each other, thus making history classes more engaging.

RQ3: In an Era of Alternative Facts, How Do Students Evaluate or Think Critically About Historical Content (Topics/Content/Perspective)?

The two key findings for the part of RQ3 that mention critical thinking are the narrative in which history is taught, and the deeper meaning/analysis of historical events. These two themes are closely related and oftentimes intertwine and overlap. As for connecting critical thinking to alternative facts, the interview questions to the students did not specifically mention alternative facts and its relation to historical knowledge, which indicates that RQ3 was not fully answered, but we can still discern two themes for how critical thinking affects historical knowledge.

Narrative. More than half (60%, 12 of 20) of the students who were interviewed mentioned the importance of the narrative in which history is taught or presented to the students. Conway (2015) suggests that history is often taught in a “Western-centric” approach, but as the demographic in the U.S. has shifted, so should the narrative in which history is taught. He believes having a history teacher/instructor bring in their perspective in history courses can benefit students learning history. This would allow the teacher and students to scrutinize what is being taught (Conway, 2015). Rather than simply taking what their teacher/instructor tells them at face value, students can make up their own conclusions about historical events. The students in this study expressed wanting to learn about all aspects of U.S. history, even the bad, controversial parts so that they can form their own opinions on what had happened, which enables them to have a better understanding and broader perspective of U.S. history, which is what critical thinking should be in a history class.

Deeper Meaning/Historical Analysis of Political Actions/Events. This theme almost directly ties into the Narrative theme, but there are some specific distinctions between being aware of the deeper meaning of historical content versus how it is presented. To me, how the content is presented is the responsibility of the teacher/instructor, whereas the deeper meaning behind that content is both the teacher/instructor’s and the students’ responsibility to discern and unpack the historical information, rather than taking information at face value. This is especially important because a lot of U.S. history is written and delivered from a “Western-centric” perspective, which can lead to teachers/instructors teaching from an “American exceptionalism” perspective (Conway, 2015). This does not teach students to

question the reasons, other than what they are told of why and how the United States got involved in international issues throughout history. Students from the focus groups expressed the importance of understanding historical content on a deeper level, both internationally and domestically, which requires critical thinking and analyses of the content.

Different Perspectives. This is a subtheme that was used to answer RQ2, but also serves in answering RQ3. As mentioned in the data for RQ2 from Chapter Four, Dakota and Skylar mentioned a mutual classmate who had a very different perspective than many of the students in the class, but rather than admonishing that student and believing he was completely wrong, what happened instead was in listening to another classmate's completely different perspective, it actually made Dakota and Skylar examine their own beliefs and values, and they both expressed a sense of appreciation for that. This is an example of critical thinking. Both Dakota and Skylar were open to hearing this different perspective and it helped them to understand more about the people around them and also themselves.

As mentioned in the opening of the analysis of RQ3, the interview questions to the student participants did not specifically ask how alternative facts and history content relate, but the most important finding is that history courses do help with critical thinking, which in turn should help students understand how to evaluate historical content. When Cote (2017) did her study with her community college students, the students expressed that they did more critical thinking in their history course than in other subjects. In history courses, we are taught to look at different resource materials and analyze the meaning and significance of these materials, which can help us understand historical narratives and context behind conflicts and content. A few of the students who were interviewed expressed learning content

in my history courses that they never learned about before, or having conversations about reasons behind political decisions that they did not think about. History can be a valuable tool to help students to do this, but it is also up to the teacher/instructor to bring this into the curriculum and make students aware of the narrative and meaning of historical content by scrutinizing historical sources and encouraging students to make their own interpretations.

Modality as a Common Finding Across All Three RQs

I did not add modality to any RQ findings because it ties into all of the RQs. Modality seemed to be very important to over half of the students interviewed. It was mentioned by 60% (12 of 20) of the students, even though not all focus groups were asked questions pertaining to the modality of their history courses. Modality of classes is also a very important topic given that the pandemic pushed everyone online for a couple of years. Some faculty and students still refuse to go back to in-person classes four years after lockdown. All of the students in the focus groups had experienced both in-person and online classes and it was fresh in their minds.

Because questions of modality were considered optional and would only be asked if time permitted, the first focus group was not asked about modality at all, but it was still mentioned in some of our conversations. We were running out of time before we got to the modality questions in the second focus group, but one of the students felt so strongly about it that he brought it up himself. The students who did talk about modality, mentioned the positive and negative aspects of online classes, but mainly talked about how online courses were not as satisfying in history courses as they were in face-to-face history courses (Buchanan & Palmer, 2017). Talking about relevant topics to history, engaging with other students and the

teacher/instructor, and critical thinking all have some sort of student-to-student interaction, but seems to be less in the online setting (Kuo et al., 2014). As the participants mentioned, part of the learning process for history courses comes from listening to other students' perspectives, but online instruction greatly reduces that aspect. History classes should be taught in-person as that would foster more interaction and expose students to different perspectives.

Connecting Findings to Contextual Framework

All findings tie back to Ladson-Billings' (2014) CRP and Giroux's (2016) CP. Students expressed the desire to see the relevancy and relatability of historical content, and to see a part of themselves or events that they are familiar with in the lessons, which is essentially CRP. Other findings, such as engagement and discussion with classmates, quality of assignments, modality, historical interpretation/analysis, and the use of supplemental material are all part of CP as the students mentioned having a richer educational experience when they are able to receive information that allows them to think critically. The themes of hearing different perspectives from classmates, having a passionate teacher who engages the students, and the narrative of historical content include elements of both CRP and CP. Students can learn from interacting with their peers and their teacher/instructor. The teacher/instructor can facilitate both the narrative in which history is being taught and encourage the students to share their perspectives on the topics discussed. Implementing CRP and CP into history pedagogy can increase the value of history courses to students.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study could be scaled up in several ways for future research. Surveys based on my findings could be used to see how other students feel about the study of history, comparing the themes to other history instructors with students who have never taken classes with me. Participation should also be solicited from students who attend different community colleges. Other focus group interviews could be conducted with students who do not know me, nor I them in order to get a better understanding of how other students feel about the pros and cons of how other history instructors teach their classes.

Additionally, a couple of interesting questions came up while analyzing the data. I had a couple of military Veterans who responded to my emails expressing interest in participating in my research. Veterans' perspectives on history education could be an interesting study in itself. Additionally, during the process of establishing the interview protocols, I did not seek to compare answers between genders, nor did I do a comparison of responses among different ethnic groups. These may be areas of further research to gather more information and compare data to get a better understanding of how these different groups view the study of history and what they perceive is important.

Military Veterans

I had four (20%) military Veterans total who participated in the focus group interviews. Their experiences and insight on history education is fascinating because they have had experiences most of their classmates, many of them a lot younger, have not had. Specifically, Vets who have been deployed seem to have a more extensive knowledge of the conflicts in which they were participating in that many of us at home do not. A separate study focused

specifically on military Veterans and their experiences in college history courses may be something to explore.

Although 20% of my participants were military Veterans, that is not representative of the overall student demographic in my classes. I tend to have at least one Veteran in each of my classes, sometimes more, but that does not equal to 20% in all of my classes, nor is it representative of the Veteran population on campus. In the focus group conversations, the non-military students expressed that they appreciated listening to the experiences of their Veteran classmates, and so do I. Their experiences are rich and broad, and their perspectives are invaluable to most of us who have never experienced serving in the military, therefore the history we learn is second knowledge compared to Veterans' firsthand experiences.

Comparing Responses Between Gender

Although I did have a survey for the general demographic of the participants in my study, I did not specifically ask them to identify themselves, and did not do a comparison of responses between genders. It may be interesting to look into whether different genders feel differently about how they learn history and what matters to them most when learning history.

Comparing Responses Among Ethnicity/Race

Like gender, I had a general survey for ethnic and racial background. Another possible study could be comparing what students from different ethnic/racial backgrounds feel about history education. This could be a very important topic considering the demographic shifts in the United States, and especially when a lot of the history that is taught in this country does not include a lot of stories and experiences of people of color. There is some mention of

African and Black Americans, and little about Mexican Americans, but other ethnic and racial groups are barely mentioned in general U.S. history.

Researcher's Contribution to History Pedagogy

When I initially started this research, I had planned on using an autoethnographic approach by examining how I teach history and what makes it effective. I switched to focus group interviews because I wanted to learn about how students feel about their history classes and what could make their experiences better. Because I had positive experiences with all of the students who were interviewed when they were enrolled in my classes, I was able to hear what worked for them. The biggest issue with that is those who did not find my pedagogy beneficial were less likely to participate in the study, which makes it difficult to figure out areas of improvement on my end as a history instructor. However, the positive comments that did come out from the interviews could be examples of how history teachers/instructors could teach in order to make history more meaningful and interesting to students. This is in no way making an assumption that my pedagogy is the best pedagogy for teaching history, but that it is a pedagogy that seems to work for many of my students. My research was not meant to be about how great my students think I am, but instead it is about what methods worked for them to learn history. What I have found is that oftentimes, it is not about the expertise in the subject, but how it is delivered and the interaction with the students that makes the subject matter appealing and more meaningful to the students.

Epilogue

At the start of this doctoral program three years ago, the political climate in the United States was already unstable, but as I am finishing up the program, it is an even scarier place

right now than it was when I started. The conflicts and disagreements have shifted to two extremely polarizing ideologies, and I question why that is. I do not think history education is important simply because I am a history instructor. I think history is important due to all the conflicts that are happening in our country and in the world right now. Historical context and knowledge are extremely important in understanding why some of the conflicts that are currently happening are playing out, from the current conflicts in the Middle East (Israeli troops in Gaza), to the military coup in Myanmar, to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, to the civil wars in Africa, to the civil unrest in Iran. Politicians in Congress make decisions that affect the people living in the United States for generations to come, and those decisions will be written and analyzed in future history textbooks. If I were one of the people analyzing the demise of American democracy in the future, I would probably conclude that the elimination or reduction of history course requirements would be one of the causes.

When I started teaching history at the college level, I started to have a deeper understanding of historical content because I processed it differently as an instructor than I did as a student. I was more critical of what I was reading as an instructor than I ever was when I was a student. No longer was I just taking information in to memorize, but as an instructor, I had to interpret and analyze historical topics on a deeper level. In order to teach history to my students, I had to teach it in a way that they could understand and think critically. I had to learn more so that I could understand how to teach them. The more I understood about history, the angrier I got. As a historian, the problems with reducing history requirements made me think of The Struggle of Orders, which is a historical conflict I had taught my students: The Patricians (upper class) of ancient Rome did not want to share the

knowledge of the Law Codes to the Plebeians (not-so-upper class) because the Patricians wanted to keep their position and power and did not want to share it with the more populous Plebeians. Knowledge is power and having the power of knowledge threatens those who are in power and want to stay in power. Keeping people ignorant keeps them from questioning the different power dynamics. Limiting history education is limiting knowledge. If we have progressed as a species, why are we allowing the same kind of oppression that happened 2500 years ago to happen today?

I see this now in the United States, from book banning to censorship of curricula and materials, especially with history. Florida is an example of this censorship in education. This is led by Governor DeSantis, who himself, has a degree in history from Yale University. I do not know what kind of history he learned nor how he interpreted what he learned, but rather than progressing, I would interpret him as regressing. Whatever the history he learned that got him to do the things he does now is not the kind of history I want my students to learn. Students should be able access books and materials and make their own conclusions about what they read. They should be allowed the freedom to think and to analyze, which is extremely important right now with all the misinformation and alternative facts and history that is happening in this country. I really feel that if those people who charged the Capitol on January 6th were taught history that challenged them to think critically, they would be better able to scrutinize a lot of the information they see and read. They would know how to listen to different perspectives and question some of the things they believe.

Knowing all the conflict we have in this country is in large part due to the dissemination of misinformation and alternative facts and histories, one would think the liberal states are

taking charge and making it a priority to push for better civics education like history and political science, but instead a liberal state like California is close to rolling back on history and political science in its educational institutions. From SB 1440 (LegiScan, 2010), to AB 1460 (CLI, 2020), to AB 928 (CLI, 2021), these politicians fail to see that the legislation they pass are doing the same thing conservative states like Florida are doing: Limiting education by reducing and replacing graduation requirements. I am aware of this because I am an educator, specifically an educator of history no less. These politicians are not aware because they are politicians making decisions favoring which group pays them more.

There is a lot of talk and attention devoted to ethnic studies being the new graduation requirement for students to graduate high school and university. California legislation has created a “one in, one out” system for graduation requirements at the CSU level to make it easier for students to complete their degree. With ethnic studies in, which requirement will be out? Is it going to be history? Is it going to be political science? Will it really be better for students to learn ethnic studies without history or political science? Why can’t it be that they learn it all so that they can broaden their perspective and knowledge? It goes back to “knowledge is power”. I think we should give our students the most knowledge and education possible, not reduce it.

As a history instructor, I do have an understanding that U.S. history has traditionally been taught in a Western-centric and American exceptionalism manner, but it is the job of history educators to teach the real history and teach diverse perspectives. Traditional history education, which is usually Western-centric and emphasizes American exceptionalism, is the reason why ethnic studies is the new thing now. That does not mean that history courses

should be replaced. It means that history courses should be restructured and revamped so that they include more diverse perspectives in order to teach our students to be more critical and open at the same time, which is what many of the students in the focus group interviews pointed out. They feel the diversity of perspectives is important to making history education relevant and engaging, which is what educators and politicians alike should learn from and put into practice. White-washing history has turned history into alternative facts, and it is up to history teachers and instructors to elevate counter-narratives to give a broader perspective of our history so that students can learn to scrutinize things that they read and hear, but also at the same time, learn to be more open and accepting.

References

- Agiesta, J. (2022). *CNN Poll: About two-thirds of Americans disapprove of overturning Roe v. Wade, see negative effect for the nation ahead*. CNN. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/28/politics/cnn-poll-abortion-roe-v-wade/index.html#:~:text=Jackson%20Women%27s%20Health%20case%20on,2022%2C%20in%20Austin%2C%20Texas.&text=Overall%2C%2063%25%20of%20US%20adults,%2C%20including%2054%25%20of%20women>
- Barrera, O., Guriev, S., Henry, E., & Zhuravskaya, E. (2020). Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics. *Journal of Public Economics*, 182(2020), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2019.104123>
- Bergen, J. K., Hantke, S. U., & St. Denis, V. (2023). Contemporary challenges and approaches in anti-racist teacher education. In R. J. Tierney, F. Rizvi, & K. Ercikan (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (4th ed., pp. 414-426). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.04056-2>
- Boehner, J. A. (2002). *H.R.1 – No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/1>
- Brownfeld, A. C. (2018). *The danger ignorance of history poses to the future of a free society*. American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Retrieved August 1, 2021, from <https://www.goacta.org/news-item/the-danger-ignorance-of-history-poses-to-the-future-of-a-free-society/>
- Buchanan, T. C. & Palmer, E. (2017). Role immersion in a history course: Online versus face-to-face in *Reacting to the Past*. *Computers & Education*, 108, 85-95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.12.008>
- Burkholder, P. & Schaffer, D. (2021). *A snapshot of the public's views on history: National poll offers valuable insights for historians and advocates*. American Historical Association. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2021/a-snapshot-of-the-publics-views-on-history-national-poll-offers-valuable-insights-for-historians-and-advocates>
- California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (n.d.). *Single subject teaching credential requirements for teachers prepared in California (CL-560C)*. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from [https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/Single-Multiple-Subject-Credentials-\(CL-560C\)](https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/leaflets/Single-Multiple-Subject-Credentials-(CL-560C))
- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (n.d.) *Management information systems data mart*. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <https://datamart.cccco.edu/DataMart.aspx>

- California Legislative Information. (2020). *AB-1460 California State University: Graduation requirement: Ethnic studies*.
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1460
- California Legislative Information. (2021). *AB-928 Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2021: Associate degree for transfer intersegmental implementation committee*.
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB928
- Carr, S. (2000). *As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students*. Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/as-distance-education-comes-of-age-the-challenge-is-keeping-the-students/>
- Conway, M. (2015). *The problem with history classes: Single-perspective narratives do students a gross disservice*. The Atlantic. Retrieved July 25, 2021, from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/the-problem-with-history-classes/387823/>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>
- Cote, J. L. (2017). "None of my history classes were like this": An experiment in mastery pedagogy. *The History Teacher*, 50(4), 597-627. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44507282>
- Creswell, J.C. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Emanuelson, E., Jr. (2018). Fake left, fake right: Promoting an informed public in the era of alternative facts. *Administrative Law Review*, 70(1), 209-232.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26495981>
- Fine, B. (1943). *Ignorance of U.S. history shown by college freshmen*. The New York Times.
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1943/04/04/85093387.html?pageNumber=1>
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 695-727). SAGE Publications.
- Gilbert, A. N. (1968). International relations and the relevance of history. *International Studies Quarterly*, 12(4), 351-359. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3013522>

- Giroux, H. A. (2016). When schools become dead zones of the imagination: A critical pedagogy manifesto. *The High School Journal*, 99(4), 351-359. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2016.0014>
- The Glossary of Education Reform. (2016). *Student engagement*. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from <https://www.edglossary.org/student-engagement/>
- Grossman, J. (2016). *Op-ed: History isn't a "useless" major. It teaches critical thinking, something America needs plenty more of*. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved August 1, 2021, from <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-grossman-history-major-in-decline-20160525-snap-story.html>
- Guba, E. G. (1981). ERIC/ECTJ annual review paper: Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology*, 29(2), 75-91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30219811>
- Isman, A., Gazi, Z. A., & Aksal, F. A. (2010). Students' perceptions of online learning. *Educational Technology*, 50(3), 53-54. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44429807>
- Johnson, L. B. (1965). *Elementary and secondary education act of 1965*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>
- Kuo, Y. -C., Walker, A. E., Schroder, K. E. E., & Belland, B. R. (2014). Interaction, internet self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning as predictors of student satisfaction in online education courses. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 20, 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2013.10.001>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2005). *Beyond the big house: African American educators on teacher education*. Teacher College Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2007). Pushing past the achievement gap: An essay on the language of deficit. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 76(3), 316-323. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034574>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. The remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74-84. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751>

- Lamar, A. (2015). *S.1177 - Every Student Succeeds Act*. Congress.gov.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- LegiScan. (2010). *California Senate Bill 1440 (Prior session legislation)*.
<https://legiscan.com/CA/text/SB1440/id/60867>
- Markowicz, K. (2017). *Why schools have stopped teaching American history*. New York Post. Retrieved August 1, 2021, from <https://nypost.com/2017/01/22/why-schools-have-stopped-teaching-american-history/>
- Masur, L. P. (2019). *Why history matters: making a persuasive case*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved July 31, 2021, from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-history-matters/>
- McLaren, C. H. (2004). A comparison of student persistence and performance in online and classroom business statistics experiences. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 2(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0011-7315.2004.00015.x>
- McLaughlin, A. C. & McGill, A. E. (2017). Explicitly teaching critical thinking skills in a history course. *Science & Education*, 26, 93-105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-017-9878-2>
- Mervosh, S. (2023). *It's not just math and reading: U.S. history scores for 8th graders plunge*. New York Times. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/us/us-history-test-scores.html>
- Milo, G. (2017). *Rebooting social studies: Strategies for reimagining history classes*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Moore, T. (2013). Critical thinking: Seven definitions in search of a concept. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), 506-522. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.586995>
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2014). *New results show eighth-graders' knowledge of U.S. history, geography, and civics*. The Nation's Report Card. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/
- The National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Center for Education Reform. http://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf
- Perrotta, K. A., & Bohan, C. H. (2013). "I hate history": A study of student engagement in community college undergraduate history courses. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 24(4), 1-28.

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1020&context=msit_facpub

Press Office. (2023). *Statement from U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona on new nation's report card on history and civics education*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/statement-us-secretary-education-miguel-cardona-new-nations-report-card-history-and-civics-education>

Rivard, R. (2013). *Udacity project on 'pause': San Jose State's experience with MOOC provider attracted enormous attention when it was launched. But students didn't do as well as they did in traditional classes*. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/18/citing-disappointing-student-outcomes-san-jose-state-pauses-work-udacity>

Roark, J. L., Johnson, M. P., Furstenberg, F., Stage, S., & Igo, S. E. (2020). *The American promise* (8th ed.). Bedford/St. Martin's.

Santayana, G. (1905). *The life of reason*. Open Road Media.

Schmidt, B. M. (2018). *The history BA since the great recession: The 2018 AHA majors report*. Perspectives on History. Retrieved August 4, 2021, from <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>

Schoen Consulting. (2018). *Holocaust knowledge & awareness study executive summary*. Retrieved March 29, 2024, from https://www.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Holocaust-Knowledge-Awareness-Study_Executive-Summary-2018.pdf

Siebörger, R. (2017). Fake news, alternative facts, history education. *Public History Weekly*, 5(8). <https://dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2017-8548>

Strauss, V. (2017). *Why so many students hate history – And what to do about it*. The Washington Post. Retrieved August 1, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/17/why-so-many-students-hate-history-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

Teachwire. (n.d.). *Black History Month activities – Best 2024 resources for KS2 and KS3*. Retrieved August 2, 2021, from <https://www.teachwire.net/news/black-history-month-teaching-resources/>

Tyrrell, I. (1991). American exceptionalism in an age of international history. *The American Historical Review*, 96(4), 1031-1055. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2164993>

UCLA History (n.d.). *Historical analysis and interpretation*. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/historical-thinking-standards/3-historical-analysis-interpretation/>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2012). *International standard classification of education: ISCED 2011*. Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

Washington, S. (2018). *Diversity in schools must include curriculum*. The Century Foundation. Retrieved August 2, 2021, from <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-schools-must-include-curriculum/?agreed=1>

Wexler, N. (2019). *Math and science can't take priority over history*. Forbes. Retrieved August 1, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2019/01/13/math-and-science-cant-take-priority-over-history-and-civics/?sh=35190d86199e>

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Relevancy

1. What characteristics make for a relevant history class?
2. What characteristics make for a relevant history instructor/module?
3. How do these characteristics impact your education and other aspects of history courses?
4. What were the strengths of your history courses?
5. What were the weaknesses of your history courses?
6. In what ways can history classes become more relevant?

Engagement

7. Please describe the level of interaction you have with your history classmates. In which modality was this experienced?
8. How does your engagement with classmates affect critical thinking in your history courses?
9. In your opinion, is student interaction in history courses important? Why or why not?
10. Can you think back to when you felt really engaged? What do you think influenced that engagement?

Critical Thinking

11. According to you, what does critical thinking mean?
12. Do you think history courses encourage critical thinking?

- a) If so, what makes your history courses encourage more critical thinking?
Can you give examples of class activities and assignments in your history courses that require you to think critically?
- b) If not, why not? What could history courses and/or instructors do to boost critical thinking?

(If time permits.*)

Modality

13. What modalities have you taken your history course(s) in? Why did you choose to take your history course in that modality?
14. Would you have rather taken your history class in a different modality? If so, what would be your preferred modality? Is your preferred modality for history offered this semester for the classes you need?
15. What positive aspects do you feel taking your chosen modality for history class have over other modalities? Why?

Appendix B

Coding Table and Frequency of Themes

Figure A1.

Pseudonyms of participants along with the frequency count of theme mentions.

Name	Connection to daily life/identity/current events/relatable	Quality of assignments	Supplemental Material	Teacher passion/engaging	Engagement/discussion	Different perspectives	Narrative	Deeper meaning/reason behind political decisions/analytical	Modality
1 - Dakota		3		2	1	3			
2 - Kaylee	6	6		5	6	1	8		
3 - Eric	6	8	1	7	4	3	5	1	
4 - Evelyn	7	4		2	3		1		1
5 - Taylor	1			1	2	4	2	1	
6 - Mark	3	2		2		3	2	2	1
7 - David	2	1	1	1	1	5		1	
8 - Alicia	2				2	2			
9 - Jordan	8	3	1		4	3	11	3	
10 - River	4	3	1	2	5	9	3	4	4
11 - Lana	3			2	1	1			
12 - Casey	6	4	3	1	4	3	4	2	4
13 - Skylar	4	1		1	3	5	2	2	5
14 - Carly	3	3	2	2	1	5			2
15 - Cameron	4	3		1	4	1			1
16 - Tricia	3	2		3	1	4	2		3
17 - Kris	9	1	3		6	2	3	1	2
18 - Jaylen	9		3	1	3	3			1
19 - Riley	3	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1
20 - Joshua	8	2	2	7	8	3		2	6
TOTAL	91	47	18	42	61	62	44	20	31
	95%	80%	50%	85%	95%	95%	60%	55%	60%