



## What Makes History Usable?

Students regularly ask, “How am I ever going to use this stuff?” In this video, Bob Bain examines exactly what makes history usable and useful. He presents an example from his own history class where students explored the history of the city of Detroit. By looking at historical documents, talking to grandparents—and yes, even reading a little history—they developed a deeper sense of their own city today.



0:01

*Professor Bob Bain, PhD  
from University of Michigan*

What makes history useful? Usable? More specifically, what makes the history we teach in schools useful and usable for our students?

Or maybe I should ask it from the point of view students? “Why do we have to learn any of this “stuff”?”

Most students have just one year of world history in high school—one year to learn something meaningful, something usable. We think that something meaningful they can learn, is to use their history skills to put facts together to tell stories and to evaluate other’s stories about the global past. This will help them to make sense of history and how it applies to themselves and their communities in the present.

Let’s take that apart a bit, by looking at the long debate we have had about what to do in the history classroom.

1:06

*Historical recreation of  
pikemen fighting on a  
battlefield*

For well over the almost 50 years I’ve been teaching history in either a public high school or a public university, politicians and educators have waged war over this question, with intense and emotional ferocity between two competing camps, each believing in the correctness of their positions and the disaster that looms should the other side win.

*Crowd carrying a banner  
with “Content!” written on it*

One group argues “It’s a set of essential or core facts, names, dates and events that make history so important,” as they march under the banner “Content & Facts Matter Most”.

*Crowd carrying a banner  
with “Skills!” written on it*

Or so some people—including me—have long argued and fought for.

“No! No! No!” their opponents respond. “Memorizing facts is trivial compared to learning how to “do” history the way historians do history—how to read and think like historians”—as they wave the banner “Critical Thinking Matters Most”

Or so some people—including me—have argued and fought for.

2:02

*Crowd carrying banners  
with “Skills!” “and” “with”  
“also” and “Content!” written  
on them*

But what if there is a little bit of truth on both sides. What if students can learn how to use their historical skills to build stories from those facts... stories that help them to apply history to their daily lives.

*Modern Detroit skyline*

Let me tell you a story.

I spent time designing a history course for students in Detroit. And we used a big driving question—why did people throughout history move in and out of the Detroit area?—to structure the course.

*Early 20th century  
streetscapes and  
maps of Detroit*

We began by asking students what they thought motivated or caused people to move into and out of Detroit? What had the students heard? What did they know about migration to their city? Were these personal stories? Family stories? Stories they’ve learned in school? In their neighborhood? In their church or synagogue? Were any of these stories connected to any larger history of the United States? Or the world?

Without too much of a set up or discussion, the class collected the stories, looking for similarities and differences between and among their ideas, their stories about why people would move in and out of their city.

**3:05**

*Old map of the Great Lakes Region, black and white streetscape, communities of people through time*

And then, over the course of the school year, students investigated changes in migration patterns to southeast Michigan and their impact over thousands of years, looking for, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to consider various reasons why different peoples—indigenous peoples, European settlers, African-Americans, immigrants from Asia, Mexico, or the Middle East—migrated to and from this community and how it compared to other communities both in the US and elsewhere.

*Archival records and bookshelves*

In their studies, students worked—as historians do - with primary sources and other historians’ interpretations of these events to construct narratives about migration to and from Detroit.

**4:05**

*Colorful map of the world*

Moving from the present to the earliest beginnings of human presence on Earth and back again, over and over, students looked at individual’s, communities’, national, and global stories. They considered how these accounts supported, extended, or challenged the stories they brought with them—as they learned to frame the events of the past in different ways. And, they considered the implications of using different stories to make sense of the past, the present, and anticipate the future.

By using the power of narrative—multiple narratives—students were able to situate themselves within a larger history that connects to their world today. But it also helps them to see the history of their city in a far more nuanced and complex way—through the eyes of multiple people, at multiple levels over an extended period of time.

*Graphic with Content and Skills together*

This is not easy work—indeed, it is far more difficult than just helping students learn a core set of facts or practices. Yet, there is strong evidence that this approach will help students not only learn the names and dates of history, not only apply the skills of historians adeptly, but to put these ideas to work.

**5:04**

*Photo montage: historic sign about George Washington; Holocaust Memorial; historians reviewing records; school textbooks*

And they do have work to do. Students, and indeed all of us, are constantly bombarded with stories about the past that other people create to get them to see or do things in a particular way; and students, and indeed all of us, must make decisions about the present that involve understanding what happened in the past. In both cases, we all need to understand important content and facts; and we all need critical thinking skills to make informed judgements; and, we all need to know how to take apart, work with, and create multiple stories about the past that influence how we think and act in the present. Stories are vital feature of what makes history usable, and a feature that schools have too long ignored in their focus on history’s facts and thinking practices. Adding narratives to history courses promises to make makes them far more usable and useful.

It will sharpen students’ awareness of the stories and narratives they met before and during our courses and will meet long after they’ve taken their last history course.

So, what are your stories?