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EDUCATION

Making History More Relevant, One Case At A Time



Melina Fernandes, 16, prefers to learn history through case studies.

Bianca Vazquez Toness/WGBH News

By **Bianca Vázquez Toness**

May 13, 2019

After years of teaching high school history, Maureen O’Hern was looking for a new way to make it relevant and engaging for students. She found the answer in a surprising place — Harvard Business School and its use of case studies.

During a recent lesson, eleventh graders in her Advanced Placement U. S. history class at **Boston Collegiate Charter School** in Dorchester pulled their desks into semi-circles and faced O'Hern.

“Let’s jump back into where we left off. What were some of King’s strategies and how and why did he develop those strategies?” O’Hern asked.

Instead of lecturing about the 1960s and Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil disobedience campaign, O’Hern posed questions. She prodded students to use evidence and build an argument. She eventually led these high school juniors to one of King’s critical decision-making moments — whether King and demonstrators should march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. after the federal government had ordered King not to.

“Why is he still contemplating crossing? We’ve talked about a lot of the concerns, safety of the people, going against the wishes of the federal government,” O’Hern said. “What’s happening here?”

Many of the students thought King should cross the bridge, citing evidence from a document on their desks.

“Obviously people are starting to lose interest,” Melina Fernandes, 16, said to the class. “And I think that him being arrested for breaking a federal order will give him publicity back.”

The students had read a narrative describing everything that led up to King’s dilemma of whether to lead a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama's capital, to push for black voting rights. The case study doesn’t include analysis, so students will do that work.

The case study method was popularized at Harvard Business School to help graduate business students understand how captains of industry made critical decisions.

David Moss, a professor at Harvard Business School, thought the method would be equally valuable helping undergraduate students of history understand how key historical figures made the decisions they did. Over the last few years, hundreds of high school teachers like O’Hern have caught on.

“It’s very exciting and rejuvenating as a teacher because I get to see students being historians,” O’Hern said in an interview with WGBH News. “This is what you do as a historian. You take a look at information, you make a judgment call and you support it with evidence. And that’s what every student is doing in the class.”

In Massachusetts, more than 80 high school teachers have been trained like O’Hern to teach using the case study method. O’Hern teaches a semester-long U.S. government class exclusively using case studies. She uses four case study lessons in her AP U.S. history class. If there were enough cases to cover the entire curriculum, she said she would teach this class only using case studies.

Students remember more if they’ve learned something this way, rather than reading it in a textbook or hearing it through a lecture, according to O’Hern. Nearly all students participate during this type of lesson, versus 50 percent to 75 percent during a typical class discussion.

Jelissa Perea, 16, said she prefers to learn history this way because case studies are written like good stories. To her, textbooks are boring by comparison.

“They kind of throw in a bunch of unnecessary facts, like what was the president’s favorite food, when you don’t really need to know that,” Perea said.

Denzel Ekes, 17, said reading case studies has made him think of history as more of a “web,” rather than a straight timeline.

Using cases to teach history gives students a “sense of the contingency of history,” Moss said.

“It’s really important to realize that when you look at people in history, it looks like they had only one set of options, but in fact that’s not how they saw it at all. And that’s not how it was,” said Moss.

Moss’s Case Method Project is working to make this way of teaching more accessible to high school teachers. So far, around 250 across the country have received free training and can use the cases for free. He says they’re considering writing cases to cover the whole A.P. U.S. history curriculum.

Our coverage of K through 12 education is made possible with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.