EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO TEACH HISTORY: A SHORT GUIDE

Main objective: Develop learners’ abilities to make sense of a complex reality.

Subsidiary enabling objectives:

1. Enhancing learners’ abilities to use the full range of cognitive skills, i.e. inferring, hypothesizing, categorizing, comparing, contrasting, correlating, describing, abstracting, recalling, extrapolating, applying, predicting, sequencing, relating, integrating, synthesizing, generalizing, interpreting, translating, empathizing, valuing, visioning, imagining, intuiting.
2. Developing learners’ understanding of systems—their components, interactions, environments, and driving forces, especially those in which humans are the actors, shared ideas motivate their actions and shape their culture, and important social and historical changes result from internal and external influences.

The following principles provide a framework to teach history:

1. Learning—permanently useful learning—requires learners to be active problem-solvers rather than mere passive receptors of information. This happens when they confront situations, problems, and puzzles requiring them not merely to remember, but to hypothesize, generalize, synthesize, make value judgments, and so on.
2. The real world is “all of a piece”—connected, seamless, and systemically integrated. People, environments, and ways of thinking and acting are woven together in complex ways. It isn’t knowledge of facts about these four, but of the relationships between them, that provide the most insight.
3. In the real world, what happens is too complicated to be captured simply by linking events chronologically. Making sense of complexity requires a comprehensive, logical system for selecting, organizing, relating and generating information, and for accessing it in memory.

These principles provide students an educational framework in which they can investigate the world around them. The open-ended nature of “investigating history” allows students with differing skill levels to participate, and the activities enhance information-processing skills and historical understanding.

1. Active Learning-Active learning, which gives learners significant puzzles and problems to solve and projects to complete, is far more likely to result in intense learning than traditional passive “read and remember” teaching.
2. Primary Sources and Complex Thought-. To develop high-order thinking skills, learners must be given resources that require them to use those skills. In the study of history, primary sources (along with good analytical questions) provide the raw material for in-depth thought.
3. Organizing Knowledge-One key to gaining control of this flood of information is learning to develop “knowledge trees”— hierarchical arrangements of information based on subsumption. Beginning with powerful main categories, then identifying sub-categories, sub-sub-categories, etc. is essential to the whole process of making sense of complex reality.
4. Setting-setting, encompasses both the primary habitat or natural environment and its resources, and the secondary, human-made habitat, ranging from tools to cities. Human activity both shapes and is shaped by all aspects of setting.
5. Demographics-Understanding any society and its historical changes required investigation of its population size, distribution, and composition, including sub-groups, and the changes that are occurring in each of these elements
6. Patterns of Actions-Every society generates standardized ways of solving its main problems, and these action patterns form major subsystems—political, economic, educational, religious, family, etc. These patterns are most apparent in a society that differs from the learner’s own, as in the investigation outlined here. These patterns resist change, but still evolve under the influence of other changes.
7. Shared Ideas-Shared ideas, values, and beliefs are the motives that collectively “explain” much of what humans are doing. Understanding these shared ideas is the single best key to making sense of any society. As with action patterns, a group’s shared ideas tend to persist for long periods, resisting change until they no longer “fit” the group’s reality.
8. Identifying Systemic Relationships-Systemic interrelationships that tie each of the other parts together, generally indicated by change over time. Developing the learner’s ability to discover these systemic relationships is the final key to improving historical understanding
9. Polarization-Of the systemic changes that shape history, one of the most significant is polarization. It causes societies to divide, and it begins and escalates hostility. Shared ideas on each side are simplified, causing growth of ideology and stereotypes. Each side takes what it considers to be defensive action, which is generally perceived as offensive action by the other group. Conditions can easily spiral into violent conflict. An understanding of the system change processes involved in polarization is essential to avoiding its dangers.
10. Autonomy-Another history-maker is the frustration and stress that grows when many people feel they lack adequate control over their own fate. This is often caused by domination by another group, by adverse economic conditions, or by other significant changes. Inadequate autonomy leads to a variety of reactions, including group formation, opinion appeals, strikes, boycotts, violence, and other responses.
11. Complex Causation-In complex systems, significant changes have multiple causes and multiple effects. Additionally, changes can feed back and reinforce transition, or, conversely, stabilize the system and inhibit further changes. These elements of system change are particularly important in generating economic cycles, but are evident whenever societal change is occurring

Civilized life requires knowledge of the past, the insights into human nature which that knowledge provides, awareness of “the trends of the era,” and a basic grasp of the dynamics of change. Pushing historical study aside, or treating it as of less importance than math, science, or some other subject, is a recipe for societal disaster.