

Rethinking American History: Creating an Equitable and Inclusive Narrative for All

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"The antidote to "feel good" history is not "feel bad" history, but honest and inclusive history"¹

Our country's schools and curriculum have evolved out of a system that is inequitable, non-inclusive, and couched in systemic racism. Traditional sources of history have left out the voices, experiences, and stories of groups of people, creating a "feel good" version of history that diminishes the issues of inequality, inequity, and race, ultimately reinforcing the view that racism was an issue of the past. Yet today's national dialogue has brought these issues to light. Racism exists in our schools, institutions, and society. How can we, as teachers, create a more equitable and inclusive classroom and experience for students? We believe that as teachers of social studies and history, we have an obligation to teach our students and help them develop into empowered citizens who strive to improve the human condition. To do this, we believe that we have to challenge the dominant, majoritarian narrative in our classrooms and courses. By doing this, we can create equitable and inclusive classrooms that support the emotional and academic health of our students to promote those who have not been represented in traditional curriculum, advancing the work of racial equity. The path we have chosen to follow to accomplish this goal is critical race theory.

Underlying Principles of Critical Race Theory in Education:

We use critical race theory to create a more equitable and inclusive narrative in our social studies and history classrooms. We follow the general guidelines of CRT and aim to design curriculum, activities, and classroom culture that can **deconstruct** the majoritarian or dominant canon of history, **reconstruct** a sense of human agency, and **construct** equitable and just relations of power. These three steps are important as CRT believes:

1. "Critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script."²
2. History curriculum can be a tool for advancing racial equity, "explore accumulated advantage and disadvantage...this helps reveal how privilege develops and gaps grow in both ends. In turn, this means that any remedies must address structural over-advantaging of whites as well as under-advantaging people of color. Further, seeing that these gaps have grown over time through the confluence and cumulative impact of myriad over-advantages and under-advantages also helps to lay bare that privilege exists, has been constructed, and will need to be intentionally and strategically dismantled systemically in order for racial equity to emerge."³

¹ Lowen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. Touchstone. NY, 2005

² Ladson-Billings, Gloria (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. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863>

³ Gulati-Partee Gita & Potapchuk, Maggie (2014) "Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity". *The Foundation Review*: Vol 6:1 http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/2_Gulati_AB3.pdf

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Our Sources:

Sources: We do not use a textbook. Rather, we “DJ” our sources by using primary sources and counter-narratives to create a fuller picture of history. We use “Digital History” out of the University of Houston as our baseline (majoritarian) history source. The technology-centric series “America the Story of US” serves as an example of the promotion of American Exceptionalism (which we use to teach critical thinking/analysis skills). Many of our counter-narratives are primary sources that are available online, or come from sources like Zinn, Library of Congress, National Archives or Smithsonian.

50,000 foot view of unit planning and CRT - Unit 1 Columbian Exchange and Colonialism

A traditional curriculum would examine this unit through the lens of Eurocentric viewpoints, such as Columbus “discovering” the Americas, the colonization and settlement of empty lands, the bias toward portraying native populations as not sophisticated and primitive. Our goal is to deconstruct this narrative, provide windows and mirrors for the students to reconstruct human agency, and construct a more equitable, inclusive, and just relations of social power by empowering students to think about how they can bring about change to rectify the past.

As students study the era of colonization in the Americas and the Columbian “Exchange,” we begin by challenging the myth of vacancy in the Americas - a version of the majoritarian narrative. By beginning from an accurate place of a hemisphere teeming with peoples, one cannot avoid addressing questions about genocide. The immediate enslavement and violence employed under Columbus’s direction sets the tone for rapid conquest with “guns, germs and steel”. These steps deconstruct the majoritarian narrative that existed that portrayed Columbus as a hero who “discovered” the Americas. To do this, students read primary sources that tell a fuller version of history, for example the writings of Bartolome de Las Casas. The reconstruction of human agency involves providing students with windows and mirrors into Native American cultures, breaking down the term to not represent a monolithic representation. The windows and mirrors provided here works to help create a positive sense of self in students, empowering them to be agents in their lives and society. The construction of equitable and just relations of power are a result of positive identity development and the sense of empowerment to enact change. Our students practice this by re-writing history after wrestling with the question of whether European explorers were “heroes or heels,” leading them to decide upon what steps should be taken to redress the injustices. Through this they learn the power of allyship and alliance, important steps for creating students who strive for equitable and just relations of power.