

Time Management and Student Ownership

How to Get Through Your Curriculum in the Time Allotted

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Why is it that some teachers can cover all the important content in the courses they teach within the time allotted and others cannot? The distinction seems to rest on the teachers' belief that they must be experts on all facets of their subject. Teachers believe that they must cover the entire curriculum and thus they fail at completing the task. Teachers need to remember that the reason they love social studies is the joy of discovery, which is what keeps them passionate about the subject. Teachers need to consistently share that feeling of discovery with their students, making them active learners. Telling a student "I don't know" is a great teachable moment. It lets the students know that history is not a finite subject and that there is always more to learn. Teachers will never know all there is to know about their subject, so they should not bother trying. What they need to do is to find a way to let the students get the most from the course in the time allotted. The issue is how to go about doing this.

As more constraints are added to a teacher's time each year, meeting course curriculum requirements becomes increasingly difficult. The following suggestions will help teachers create the time they need to cover the material effectively without worrying that they have missed something, even when they do. These suggestions also allow students to leave a course with the confidence that they can handle any assessment or related course in the future, while allowing the teacher time for a life outside the classroom.

One valuable way to accomplish your goals is to collaborate with another teacher who has a similar set of goals. Most teachers work in a school big enough to have more than one teacher teaching the same subject. If not, other social studies teachers have probably taught your subject in the past and can be most helpful. Collaboration will help you feel more competent in areas in which you do not have extensive knowledge, collaboration will cut your workload by allowing you to delegate responsibilities, and

collaboration will produce higher-quality end products. For instance, when making up a new test, each teacher on the collaborative team can be responsible for questions on certain topics; that way the burdensome task of developing good test questions does not fall entirely on one person. Collaboration will especially aid you in deciding what is important when focusing on the big picture.

Teachers need to realize that they can also collaborate with their school's other professionals, such as the librarian and media specialist. That does not mean just consulting with them; most will come to classrooms and teach the particular task in which they specialize. The time of teachers autonomously teaching in their classrooms is at an end.

If you do not have a support system in your school, you need to focus on what you can do to streamline the work for yourself. Taking care of yourself is key to being a positive force in the classroom every day. Students enjoy classes taught by teachers who love what they do, show that they continue to learn, and enjoy sharing what they have learned. If you continue to pursue what you love, your enthusiasm will transfer to the students. Taking care of yourself means making sure that you do not take on more than you can handle. There are certain ways to accomplish this; planning effective lessons to reach students with multiple learning styles and grading efficiently are two important skills that take time initially but ease your workload in the long run.

I have a colleague who plans his lessons in the shower on the morning he is presenting them. He then rushes around school for an hour before the students arrive, throwing together whatever materials are at hand, many of them substandard. He then spends more time in class explaining what students are to do with these last-minute activities, causing more stress that could have been avoided with some planning.

Many teachers tend to rely on lectures and worksheets provided as ancillary materials. Also, videos and movies are often overused and tend to take more time than they are worth. Admittedly, some videos are well worth showing in their entirety; however, most are definitely not. So how do you get around these pitfalls? Learn how to effectively use the technology of PowerPoint or Flash Maker to merge your lecture with short embedded video clips (no longer than three minutes each). Someone with minimal technological skills can learn how to use PowerPoint in a few hours. Teachers who are more technologically challenged can take classes offered by school districts or get help from the school technologist. PowerPoint has gained a bad reputation from commonly being overdone and misused; however, when used correctly it is a major time-saver that can engage students far more than a traditional teacher lecturing. The problem with the traditional lecture is that it reaches only the auditory learner. A well-done PowerPoint will engage the auditory learner with sound, the visual learner with pictures and video, and the kinesthetic learner will take notes and do embedded tasks during the lesson.

It takes Ms. Jones longer to teach World War II than it took to fight it.

"Time bandits" are those favored topics that are given more time than they warrant. Letting go of those lessons will free up time to devote to a more balanced curriculum. These time bandits are often the topics that either the instructor or the students find most interesting. Why are they interesting to the students? Because the teacher is excited about teaching those topics. Ultimately, however, the student loses out when other topics are lost to these time bandits. In secondary history class some of the most common time bandits are ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, the Renaissance and Reformation, the French Revolution, the Great Depression in the United States, and World War II. In our world history course most of these topics are covered in two to three days plus an outside student reading instead of the week or more that each topic could easily steal from the course. It is fairly common for teachers to finish the school year no farther along than World War II; this is a disservice to the student.

When studying the Civil War in U.S. History, I had to memorize fifty battles, the generals on each side, and the outcome of each; do I remember any of that now? No.

Focusing on the big picture means that causes, effects, and analysis are more important than memorizing trivial facts. Too many students, reflecting back on history class, see it merely as systematic memorization of dates and names without express purpose. Students get the wrong idea about what history is really about and thus begin to avoid history.

By remaining focused on the big picture, the teacher can easily get to those topics that might otherwise be dropped from the curriculum due to a lack of time or knowledge. The topics most commonly neglected by stressed teachers include India, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, environmental history, Ethiopia and East Africa (600–1750), imperialism in the Middle East, the fall of communism, globalization, and ideologies of the twentieth century. As mentioned earlier, teachers should not be afraid to teach outside their comfort zone. Although it is common in college to specialize in a historic period, it is becoming more common and more acceptable to be a generalist. High school teachers who see themselves as generalists will better serve their students and will be more willing to give up those time-bandit habits, discussed earlier, in favor of a more balanced curriculum.

A final goal that will help teachers get through the curriculum is to get the students to buy into the course and see that ownership of their learning will enhance their classroom experience. An important way to make sure this happens is to devise assignments that force the students to manage their time in a way that effectively helps the teacher cover the material. Repetitive assignments that can be adapted to different time periods and used consistently during the year can help a student focus on curriculum rather than on shifting assignment types. This allows students to improve the skills being emphasized by reflecting on past assignments. Also, by doing the same types of assignments, students build confidence as they see their success increase during the year. This keeps the students focused on the big picture of learning the material and not the memorization of trivialities. Most tasks should be cumulative in some way; if students know that what they are doing is going to lead them to a task focusing on the big picture, then they will make those connections in their head during the unit in anticipation of the final task.

Some small tasks to get the students started toward the big picture are weekly reading quizzes and discussion. The point of weekly reading quizzes is to make sure that the students comprehend those aspects of the topic that you do not cover in class. To effectively do this takes long-term planning. You need to dissect the textbook into its topics. Pay special attention to topics that you will not cover in class and topics that you are not comfortable that you will cover effectively. Give the students reading assignments averaging twenty pages a week (we do this six weeks at a time). Then consistently quiz the students on these reading assignments; for example, each Friday give an oral quiz that consists of five questions and a bonus question. When making up questions, remember to focus on the big picture and not trivialities. Never ask dates or names unless they are milestones. Give a different quiz to each class you teach. Assuming you teach five classes, you need twenty-five questions (plus five bonus questions) covering each read-

ing assignment. If you work with a collaborative team, this is a good place to divide up the responsibility. Do not be shocked when the quiz grades start very low. This is one of those repetitive assignments for which students figure out how to prepare more effectively as time progresses. If you allow students to bring in handwritten notes, limit the notes so the students learn to take effective notes instead of merely copying from the textbook.

It is also important to get students to analyze primary sources and other scholarly works. This is a life skill that will be valuable in later academic and professional environments. To do this effectively, use guided discussion. Assign articles to the student ahead of time, usually in packets that contain three to eight readings on a topic. Include activities and questions to guide the students toward the big picture. Allow several days for the students to read the articles. Then dedicate one class period to the discussion of the articles; this is the basis for most of the class participation grade. These discussions can be teacher-led or student-led (like Socratic seminars or inner-outer circles). Students are responsible for their own participation in the discussion. It is not the teacher's responsibility to call out students who have not read the materials; this will be evident in their cumulative participation grade. Obviously, many other types of assignments, such as student-created graphic organizers, can get the students thinking about the major themes, but we think that the two discussed here are among the most useful: "snapshots" and "mental maps."

At the end of each unit, assign a task that forces the student to put all the pieces together and create a finished product that is comprehensive as well as a good short-term and long-term study tool. Two assignments that have gained positive feedback from the students are period snapshots and mental maps. Period snapshots allow students to take a look at various empires or regions and compare them socially, politically, economically, and culturally. For instance, for a comparison of the Han, Roman, Persian, and Gupta/Mauryan empires, students take detailed notes on the social, political, economic, and cultural (SPEC) aspects of these societies and then come up with main-idea sentences encompassing the notes for each category. In essence, the student is preparing for an objective and subjective assessment.

Mental maps are another comprehensive assignment. Students can complete this task in various ways that suit their individual learning style. To create a mental map, the student takes visual notes on a map background. The focus of the map is connections between societies (both positive and negative) across space and time. Using a given reading assignment, the student transfers the information onto the map in a series of drawings, symbols (necessitating a key), and text boxes. This assignment is especially good for learning trade patterns, interaction between humans and the environment, and cultural diffusion. The students should not focus on SPEC issues on this assignment.

Many teachers find research papers a daunting task, but it is imperative that you assign at least one during the allotted time of the course. First a teacher must design a list of thesis-directed prompts that are appropriate to the course. Student choice is essential to get buy-in on a topic that interests the learner. Students, however, cannot have total freedom; that would result in hundreds of papers about the history of rock and roll or the civil rights movement. Topics should be ones that will not be covered in class until after the due date of the paper; it's no good having the teacher lesson parroted back. Then the focus should be not the length of the paper, but the quality and the skills mastered. A three- to four-page paper is an appropriate length for a high school student.

The teacher must then clearly explain what the parameters of the end product will be. This takes time away from teaching content; but the teacher will find that the writing the students are prepared to do is usually not what is desired in a finished historical research paper and the students writing must be shaped to be more analytical, critical, and persuasive. Include a detailed grading rubric when you assign the task. Students who know up front what their grade will be based on will write a paper toward that end.

Give the students four weeks (including four weekends) to complete the task, but have a project check up after one week where you inspect the student's thesis paragraph and list of sources. Give the students some small grade for this. Then have a rough draft due one week later, also with a small grade attached. In most cases, this first rough draft will be very poor. Make copious comments to ensure that the student understands what to correct. This is also the point where the instructor will catch that small group of students who have not started their paper and the teacher can take appropriate action. Have the final draft of the paper due on a Monday; this gives students a final weekend, but offer some extra credit for students who have finished the Friday before. Require that an electronic version of the paper be emailed to the teacher or directly through a website that checks for plagiarism and other forms of cheating.

Grading the papers will now be faster for the teacher because of the effort put out to ensure higher quality essays; and the students will have completed a very complicated task by taking it one small step at a time and creating a much less stressful atmosphere.

Once you have your assignments in mind, it is time to plan how to assess them in a timely fashion. When it comes to grading, it is more important that students get constructive feedback on a few assignments than to continue putting effort into tasks whose results they will not see. First, let us look at assignments that are fast for the students to complete and easy for the teacher to assess.

Students need to do homework, but teachers do not need to grade everything that is assigned. There are other ways to assess these assignments. One way is called "stamped"

assignments. These began as a substitute for a notebook grade, since no teacher wants to carry 150 notebooks home to grade. Although teachers give up the old notion that every student needs a notebook, stamped assignments reinforce the bigger idea that students need to be responsible for their own organization. Stamps allow the teacher to quickly assess whether homework has been done. An entire class of stamped assignments can be graded in a few minutes. The teacher uses a rubber stamp to stamp work that is done on time. Students who do not do the work do not get a stamp. The responsibility of keeping track of the stamped work falls on the student until the end of the grading period when it is turned in for a major grade. The grade is assessed by simply counting the number of stamps and not by checking the accuracy of each task attempted. Each stamp is worth a portion of the total grade, which usually works out to being the equivalent of a test grade. Stamps are most useful when doing preparation for a discussion, guided reading, video questions, graphic organizers, reviews, and so on. The topics covered in the stamped assignments are then assessed on the tests or other assessment methods to make sure that students understand that all assignments are relevant and that the teacher does not fall into the habit of assigning trivial work that will not be useful in the future.

One problem with grading is that teachers often have a good idea for a project or assignment, but have trouble conveying to the students what is expected from the work. A rubric, provided to students when the assignment is given, will ensure that both teacher and students stay focused on the skills and materials to be learned; this will allow students to create better products and, in turn, will make grading faster and more efficient. Rubrics can be as simple or complicated as the teacher wants, but the clearer the rubric, the fewer explanations the students will demand. Students need to understand what each assignment requires. A rubric will also help the student understand exactly where they earned points or did not. Rubrics additionally improve consistency and standardization in grading, thus creating a climate of fairness in the classroom.

We had a student who once wrote a seventeen-page dissertation when the directions clearly asked for a three- to five-page essay. The student added so much extra information that it was difficult for the teacher to determine whether the task had been completed. The student learned a valuable lesson about following directions and providing quality over quantity.

Teachers should consider carefully the required length of each written assignment. Topics should be narrowed so that comprehensive student work can be achieved in as few pages as possible. There is no need to assign a ten-page paper when three pages will adequately address a topic. Students learn to be succinct and make clear arguments

when given limited space to do so; students tend to be verbose when they feel the need to fill pages. This is also true for the teacher who creates an assignment that is unnecessarily complicated for the learner and unwieldy for the teacher to grade. The longer and more complicated the assignment, the more time it takes to grade that assignment. An assignment should not be so long that the student will have forgotten much of its content before it is assessed and returned by the teacher.

Peer grading is another strategy that will save a teacher time. When using peer grading, rubrics are especially helpful as they provide a concise guide for keeping the student grader on task. Peer grading is a reteaching tool that is most effective when used on assignments that have concrete answers that cannot be argued (trade-'n'-grade) or when you are checking for understanding especially in regards to teaching writing skills. For example, when teaching students to write a proper body paragraph for a historical essay, you first have students write their own paragraph. Two students then exchange paragraphs and locate the essential parts of a properly written paragraph in their classmate's work (topic sentence, evidence, analysis, and transition). By writing their own paragraph and then recognizing and critiquing the required parts in their classmate's paragraph, students become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses when writing.

For many teachers, grading is the most unpleasant aspect of teaching. It can be extremely repetitive and take a great deal of time. Since it must be done, the key is to make the task less onerous by using rubrics, peer grading, and other time savers at your disposal.

Teaching well takes time and dedication. One key is to take those shortcuts available to you without sacrificing the essence of what the students need to learn. To stay at the top of your profession means continuing to take courses, attend workshops, and go to lectures that inspire you to keep your curriculum fresh. To stay on top of your classroom means being efficient and organized in order to create a smooth-running class that challenges students and that they nevertheless enjoy. Remember that, although teaching is a job, teaching well is a vocation and teaching efficiently will maintain enthusiasm.

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