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Four Lessons For Studying Jefferson

After several weeks of studying Thomas Jefferson, a few practical applications for teachers have become apparent to me. Here are four lessons, taken from studying Jefferson that may be useful for teachers who are preparing to teach about him.

Lesson 1—Don't Skirt the Tough Issues

Jefferson's life was a mixed bag when viewed from the 21st Century perspective. He was both a brilliant writer and statesman, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and the 3rd President of the US. His resume is one of the most impressive of any American historical figure, and other than a few of his contemporaries, who else even comes close to his importance? Yet, Jefferson lived during a time when slavery was legal and profitable, and as a member of the Virginia elite relied on slavery to survive. He was a plantation owner and, as recent DNA and historical evidence suggests, Jefferson likely fathered at least one child with his slave, Sally Hemmings.

It is difficult to know exactly how much to discuss with students about these more dicey topics. Certainly, some things are not age appropriate. However, as much as possible, don't avoid the tough issues. There really are valuable lessons to be learned in the process making sense of contradictory aspects of his life. That Jefferson owned

slaves and yet wrote the famous words “all men are created equal” reveals a lot about Jefferson, the time in which he lived, the system of slavery, and even the meaning of the words of the Declaration of Independence when viewed in historical context.

Contradictions like these also provide great discussion questions: What was the purpose of the Declaration of Independence? Did Jefferson mean “all men” to include slaves when he wrote the Declaration of Independence? Why did Thomas Jefferson own slaves? These are all valuable questions to ask, which can be tailored to a variety of age groups.

I would suggest that the best way to approach these questions is to look at them within a historical context. As best as possible, give students a sense for the world in which Jefferson lived—as a Virginia planter and slaveholder, a lawyer, a British subject (as he was for a third of his life), etc. The more information we can provide our students, the better they will understand him and this period of history. Furthermore, by approaching these topics in this way, we can teach our students to think historically and accurately about the past.

Lesson 2—Heroes Don’t Need to Be Put on a Pedestal

Jefferson, like few other Americans excluding perhaps only Washington and Lincoln, plays a critical role in our national identity. His face is on our money. His name and words are enshrined in a temple-like memorial in our nation’s capital. We cannot celebrate democracy and the birth of our country without mentioning his name. It has been said that if America is wrong, Jefferson was wrong, and if America is right, then

Jefferson is right. Jefferson was one of the first captains of our nation and charted our course for better or worse.

Being an important American, Jefferson is often put on a pedestal by those who love him, or in the gutter by those who do not. Often times peoples' opinions of Jefferson tend to say more about themselves and their view of America than they say about him as a historical person. Historian Richard Bernstein has pointed out that this seeming choice between one of two perspectives of Jefferson—between Jefferson the founding father and Jefferson the hypocrite—is a false choice. History need not be about revering or reviling the past. Rather the job of history and history teachers is to reveal the past in order to understand it better.

Jefferson and his contemporaries could not see into the future and had no way of knowing if what they were doing was right. On the topic of slavery, Jefferson himself was very conflicted in his letters and other writings. On the topic of the new Republic, Jefferson and other founding fathers commented frequently that they did not know how long the Republic would last. They were aware of the difficulty of the task to which they had committed themselves. In some ways, looking at the doubts and insecurities of a man like Jefferson makes his life more impressive. In doing so we realize that he achieved what he did as a mere human like us. In the end, teaching students to view Jefferson at eyelevel, rather than on a pedestal or in the gutter, to observe and not judge, will allow them to understand him better.

Lesson 3—Use Primary Sources—Diaries, Letters, etc.

Jefferson wrote a lot and as a result we have the opportunity to use his writings in our classes. These writings, which range from letters, to diaries, to farm records, provide a great resource for understanding his relationships with others and his world. He kept meticulous records on gardening, farming, material possessions, and many other things. He corresponded with the leading Americans of his time, like John Adams, and he also wrote to his daughters and other family members. Finally, he kept his drafts of the Declaration of Independence, which provide an interesting look at how he wrote that document. Many of these resources are freely available online and are easily accessible for classroom use. Using an age appropriate selection of these documents can help students understand how we know about the past and how history is written.

Lesson 4—Talk About Jefferson’s Friends (and Enemies)

Jefferson was a man connected with the most influential people of his time. It is difficult to think of any important historical/political figure of the Early Republic who did not have a relationship with Jefferson. Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Madison, Monroe, and many others all had connections with Jefferson. In teaching about these men, teachers have access to a very interesting thread that can be woven throughout the events of this period.

In elementary and junior high classes, students may find it meaningful to read biographies of these historical figures as a way to learn more about them. In the older grades, students could analyze a variety of different issues and events by reading the

correspondence between men like Jefferson and Adams, or Jefferson and Madison.

Looking at what these men were a part of, as well as what they were not apart of (ie. The Constitutional Convention—for Jefferson and Adams) says a lot about the time in which they lived and the importance of what they did instead (in the case of Jefferson and Adams, they were in Europe securing loans for the fragile Republic). Understanding these relationships can help students to understand Jefferson and these historical periods better.

Concluding Thoughts

The theme that runs through these four lessons more than any other, is that building context for students to think about the past is one of the most important things we can do as teachers. I hope that each of these lessons might be helpful in teaching about Thomas Jefferson and other topics in history.