

Teaching World History Thematically: Essential Questions and Document-Based Lessons to Connect Past and Present. Rosalie Metro. New York: Teachers College Press, 2020. ISBN 9780807764466.

Rosalie Metro's *Teaching World History Thematically* provides a guide to teaching the sprawling subject of world history by theme rather than through a traditional chronological framework. The work, intended for use in Grades 7-12 and, according to the author, capable of meeting virtually all sets of U.S. state and national standards, divides World History into nine themes. Each theme is centered around a "21st century issue" or "essential question" that humans have wrestled with over large periods of time. Units begin with a document from the recent past and move on to a series of document-based lessons representing various historical figures answering the same question. Themes include "what is worth fighting for?" and "who is civilized, and who is a barbarian?" Altogether, the lessons are intended to help students make connections between past and present and to develop critical thinking skills through the regular use of document analysis.

If you are already convinced that a thematic approach to world history works, then this book presents a helpful guide. Although she acknowledges that her claims on the merits of thematic history lack a firm basis in empirical research, Metro insists that the book will encourage "critical thinking, literacy, and active citizenship," allowing teachers to break out of the "habit" of teaching a chronological "landslide of facts" (2-3). But the book does not make a robust case for why the approach is superior to other methodologies, and might thus be unconvincing to readers who do not already accept this.

Metro strongly critiques chronological history as overly dependent on textbooks and too fact-heavy. But leaden narratives and endless barrages of factual content coverage are not necessarily related to instruction based on a chronological approach. The real issue at stake is

that of selectivity. Educators and scholars have been preaching the benefits of selecting the *most important* material in world history for some time, consistently warning of the danger of trying to cover everything. Indeed, Metro herself practices this selectivity by choosing only nine themes to center her narrative when there are many, many more possibilities (the book, in fact, provides no identifiable justification for which themes were chosen and which were left out). The truth is that no matter the choice between a chronological, thematic, regional, or other approach, it is up to curriculum developers and teachers to ensure that they highlight the most salient facts in world history.

The approach recommended here also runs the (unacknowledged) danger of presentism. For an event to matter and be included, it must be directly and obviously relevant to a student's experience in the here and now. For Metro, this is central since it allows students to powerfully connect with the past. But to understand history is to encounter people that look, think, and act very differently than we do in the twenty-first century. People in the past had very different concerns and outlooks than we do today. If everything must be immediately relevant then history loses a great deal of the context and complexity that makes the discipline so rich and fascinating.

The author is on firmer ground in saying that a document-based approach has much to recommend it and that textbooks should not be the sole instructional material in a world history classroom. Each unit contains interesting and thought-provoking documents that are readily accessible to secondary-level students. Unit Five, for instance, investigates the theme of equality vs. hierarchy and provides documents from figures such as Aristotle in the fifth century, Tokugawa Ieyasu in the early seventeenth century, and B. R. Ambedkar in the twentieth century. Metro includes useful teaching tools like mini-lecture notes, vocabulary suggestions, reflection

questions, and lists additional resources for further study. The short documents, along with the supplementary resources, could usefully serve as the basis of class activities and discussion.

When taken together, Rosalie Metro's *Teaching World History Thematically* presents an interesting approach to world history. Though the book is unconvincing that a thematic approach is superior to other methods of teaching the subject, it would nevertheless be a useful supplement to any world history teacher's library. That the book has something to offer even to skeptics of the thematic approach is a credit to the author's thoughtful inclusion of documents, lecture ideas, and additional resources.

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