

## Why study history? A brief lesson

As teachers we should be able to clearly justify to our students anything we teach in school. This website offers a number of very good reasons for studying history. (See the Uses of History by studentsfriend.com or Why Study History? by Peter N. Stearns.)

While I may know in my gut, as well as in my mind, that knowledge of history is important for people living in a free society, I can sometimes find it difficult to convey this awareness to my students. At the beginning of this school year I tried a new approach that seemed to help my students visualize the relevance of history. The idea was inspired by an essay from Michael Oakeshott entitled "Present, Future and Past."\*

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I turned down the lights in my classroom and asked the students to close their eyes and, "Imagine you are at a beach on a sunny day." With your mind's eye, look around you. You see the waves lapping at the shore. To your left you see children in colorful swim suits building sand castles, laughing and splashing in the water. To the right you see a boat dock painted blue. Several small boats are tied to the dock. You are living in the present, observing your surroundings and feeling the warmth of the sun on your skin.

After spending some time sitting on the beach, you are becoming bored and hot, and you begin to think of the future. What do you want to do? (At this point, I asked a few students what they will do next. One suggested going into the water.) How did you decide? Based on your past experience you know the water will be cool and refreshing, and playing in the waves will be fun, so you decide to go for a swim. Living in the present, you are making a plan for the future based on your knowledge of the past. The present, the future and the past are always tied together and are always with us.

It's getting later now, and the sun is beginning to set over the water. It is time to think about going home. (I ask a few students to suggest how they will get home, and how they knew they could get home this way.) You know that you arrived at the beach on a boat and that you left the boat tied to the dock. You know how you will get home. This knowledge is comforting, and you decide to stay awhile longer and enjoy the sunset. As you can see, your decisions about the future are based on your knowledge of the past.

But, suddenly a satellite falls from the sky knocking you unconscious. You awake with amnesia, remembering nothing of the past. (What are your feelings now?) You don't know why you are on a beach, where home is or how to get there. It's getting dark and you are frightened. You begin to panic because your loss of the past means you are hopelessly lost in trying to cope with the future.

Relax. You will probably never be struck by a falling satellite...and you will learn what you need to know about beaches and swimming and getting home from your own personal experience. But, how will you learn of important things that you cannot experience for yourself? How will you learn of the larger world outside your own personal experience?

This is why we have schools, so you can learn from the experiences of others gathered over centuries of human experience. Without this knowledge, you would suffer from a kind of amnesia that would leave you lost when it comes to understanding important matters in your future. For example, why would foreign terrorists want to attack you and other Americans? Should the United States go to war with Iraq? Should we try to stop global warming? Should we work for economic justice in the world? Should scientists be allowed to alter human genes?

You live in a free society, in a democracy, where citizens are expected to help decide these kinds of issues and - the truth is - citizens DO help decide important issues in our country. It was the people, not the government, that brought the Vietnam War to an end. It was the people who led the way in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; the government followed. The people of the United States, and their elected representatives, will decide if they can support a war against Iraq.

We all need knowledge from the past--whether it comes from personal experience or from studying history. It is our only guide to the future.

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\*Oakeshott, Michael, On History and Other Essays, Liberty Fund, Inc.1999