Program: An American History Exploration

Mission: Educate, Honor, & Challenge ourselves & our local community

Purpose: To explore our American History while discovering and uncovering our own family history

This FREE, SAFE, OPEN & INCLUSIVE program is an intergenerational community exploration where all walks of life and backgrounds are welcome and encouraged to join, share, and explore our eclectic and multi-cultural American and family history.

Communication Guidelines for a Brave Space (from OCRacial Justice Collaborative)

1. Welcome multiple viewpoints. Speak from your own experience by using “I” statements. Ask questions to understand the sources of disagreements.

2. Own your intentions and your impacts. Respect each other’s experiences and feelings by taking responsibility for the effects of your words. On the other side, if you have a strong reaction to something, let the group know. Be open to dialogue.

3. Work to recognize your privileges. Use this space to recognize and investigate your privileges (for example: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability. Honor the different experiences that we all bring to this space.

4. Take risks: Lean into discomfort. We are all in process. Challenge yourself to contribute even if it is not perfectly formulated.

5. Step back. Share speaking time and try to speak after others who have not spoken.

6. Notice and name group dynamics in the moment. We are all responsible for this space. Be aware of how others are responding or not responding. Ask for a “time out” or dialogue if needed.

7. Actively listen. Use your energy to listen to what is said before thinking about how to respond. Notice when defensiveness and denial arise.

8. Challenging with care. Find ways to respectfully challenge others and be open to challenges of your own views. Think about how to question ideas without personal attacks.

9. Confidentiality. Share the message, not the messenger.

10. Break it down. Use simple language and background information when necessary. Ask for clarification if needed.

11. Ask for consent to continue the conversation after the meeting. Everyone will have different reactions to what we learn today, and once we break, not everyone will want to engage in the same way. Ask “can I continue the conversation with you?” If you would like to further engage with someone.

*Guidelines developed by AWARE-LA (awarela.org)*
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Discussion Book: Lies My Teacher Told Me (1995) by James W. Loewen

TODAY’S AGENDA: MEET/GREET/CH.1 DISCUSSION

DATE: Saturday, November 24, 2018
TIME: 1PM – 3PM
LOCATION: 1ST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH – ORANGE (1855 Orange Olive Rd, Orange)

1:00pm: Welcome - Icebreaker Dance & Video
- Music, Dance, Greet: Celebration – Kool & The Gang
- FFVFOC President & Chapter Introduction/Invocation – Prayer & Flag
- Throwback Video: U.S.O. Bob Hope Troupe entertains U.S. soldiers on Bougainville during World War II: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNXD-NEnto2M
- Group Introductions: share your name, where you’re from, affiliated groups/organizations/school, your personal gender pronouns, how did you hear about the discussion, what do you hope to gain/learn/experience from attending the discussion, & share thoughts on quote.
- Review the Communication Guidelines for a Brave Space.
- Goal: Educate, Honor, Challenge

1:30 – 2:00pm: Educate: Introduction & Ch. 1 Discussion
Introduction & Chapter 1 Review: Handout & Open Discussion

2:00 – 2:10pm: 10 min Break

2:10 – 2:40pm: Honor: Pat Alviso & Jeff Merrick – Military Families Speak Out & Peace Club Alliance
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Leading Discussion Topic/Question: How does being labeled a hero affect a veteran, those that served, and their families? Introduce Pat Alviso – background, affiliated organizations – Peace Club Alliance & Military Families Speak Out, share her thoughts of the posed question.

2:40 – 2:55pm: Challenge: Shared Thoughts on Discovered & Relevant Material

- Artwork – Jeannette & Francisca
  - Jeannette – Veteran/soldier shadow
  - Francisca – Jesus playing at the feet of Joseph

2:55 – 3:00pm: Closing

- Community announcements & upcoming events
- Pass the hat donations for using the space
- Closing song/prayer led by Francisca Klos

Material:


Audiobook: Part 1: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flgmjdxDMG8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flgmjdxDMG8); Part 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_wSRuqFG4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_wSRuqFG4)

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*Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* is a 1995 book by James W. Loewen, a sociologist. It critically examines twelve popular American high school history textbooks and concludes that the textbook authors propagate false and mythologized views of American history. In addition to his critique of the dominant historical themes presented in high school textbooks, Loewen presents themes that he says are ignored by traditional history textbooks. A revised hardcover edition was released on April 1, 2008.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lies_My_Teacher_Told_Me

**Lies My Teacher Told Me Introduction**

**Summary & Analysis**

**Summary**

High school students hate history, Loewen says, and there are many reasons why. Many students say that history is dull or useless. Additionally, minorities (especially African Americans and Native Americans) tend to be worse at learning history than their white counterparts, perhaps because high school teachers’ view of history is “too neat and rosy.” Another mark of how bad high school history classes have become is that in college, professors regularly criticize K-12 history classes, and in some ways prefer that their incoming students not have taken history in high school at all. The strange thing about history is that even though high school history classes are widely perceived as boring and poorly taught, history itself is widely perceived as fascinating. Historical books and films routinely become blockbusters, and most people would agree that U.S. history is full of gripping stories. So we must ask ourselves: what has gone wrong with high school history classes? To begin answering the question, Loewen says, it’s important to notice that history textbooks dominate high school history classes to a greater degree than the textbooks for any other subject. History textbooks are huge, colorful, and expensive. Students now have access to free information on the Internet, and yet textbook companies continue printing enormous textbooks, even though they’re growing obsolete. Students often complain that history textbooks are boring. In part, textbooks are boring because they rarely use the present to illuminate the past. For example, textbooks rarely ask students to think about the role of race in contemporary society as a way of studying the Civil Rights movement. Similarly, history textbooks tend to be overly optimistic and naive in their view of society. They encourage students to “celebrate America’s heritage”—a message that understandably alienates African Americans, women, Native Americans, etc. A more general reason why history textbooks are bad is that they’re influenced by nationalistic biases. History textbooks don’t just describe American
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Lies My Teachers Told Me is an alternative history textbook that aims to present history as interesting, exciting, and deeply controversial. It includes several chapters on the causes and effects of history textbook usage. It aims, in short, to make history, the most “irrelevant” subject we’re taught, highly relevant.

Analysis

In the opening section of the book, Loewen establishes the problem that he’ll go on to analyze: the widespread unpopularity of history class in American high schools. Loewen conveys the extent of the problem by comparing history with other subjects, suggesting that there is something uniquely wrong with history—that is, something fundamentally wrong with the way it’s taught in American schools. Even though “history” is an unpopular subject in schools, Loewen argues that there’s nothing inherently boring or tedious about learning about the past—if there were, then nobody would go to a movie theater to watch a blockbuster historical epic. Loewen proceeds in the manner of a sociologist (which he is), trying to determine what might be causing students to perceive history class as boring.

In the age of the Internet, the history textbook is rapidly becoming obsolete—and yet publishers keep on printing them. Loewen’s premise here is that a school subject is interesting largely because students can find some connection between the subject and their own lives. History becomes interesting, then, when students see a connection between their lives and the past. History textbooks are alienating for many American students, however, because they fail to address the darker aspects of America’s history (and present). In this section, Loewen offers three especially important reasons for the poor quality of textbooks: 1) nationalist biases; 2) mediocre writers; 3) an unambiguous tone that suggests history is a settled issue not open to interpretation. Loewen will examine all three of these reasons in depth later on in the book. For most of the book, Loewen will “lead by example,” sketching out a nuanced, lucid history of the U.S. that implicitly critiques the dry, dull style of most American history textbooks. In the final three chapters, he’ll look at some of the cultural and economic reasons for poor textbook quality.

https://www.litcharts.com/lit/lies-my-teacher-told-me/introduction-something-has-gone-very-wrong
Lies My Teacher Told Me Chapter 1

Summary & Analysis

Summary

This chapter is about “heroification”—the process by which fascinating, controversial people are gradually transformed into boring, one-dimensional figures in history textbooks. Textbooks are full of details about the lives of famous people, but rarely do they give a sense for those people’s flaws and inconsistencies—i.e., the very things that make them interesting. Loewen begins by looking at two familiar figures from history textbooks: Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson. Almost every American student knows that Keller was deaf and blind, yet learned to read, write, and speak. But textbooks almost never discuss Helen Keller’s adult life. In fact, Keller had a fascinating and consequential career as radical socialist. She praised the Soviet Union, supported unions, donated money to the NAACP, and even hung a red flag (a symbol of the Soviet Union, and of socialism) over her desk. Throughout her life, Keller was criticized for her “radical politics.” Whether we agree with Keller’s beliefs or not, Keller was a remarkable woman, whose legacy stretches far beyond her deaf-blindness—and yet almost no history textbooks say so. Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. president during World War I, was an equally controversial figure. During his time in office, the U.S. sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Latin America and the West Indies to install pro-American heads of state. In 1915, for instance, when the democratic government of Haiti refused to join the U.S. in declaring war on Germany, Wilson sent forces to dissolve the Haitian parliament and seize farmers’ property. In the ensuing war, American troops murdered more than 3,000 Haitians who fighting for their rights to self-determination and private property. Amazingly, history textbooks either ignore Wilson’s interventionist foreign policy, or characterize Wilson as a “reluctant warrior” who never wanted to send troops to the Americas. Such a characterization is “sheer invention.” Many textbooks describe Wilson as a courageous advocate for self-determination who fought for democracy in Europe. The truth, however, is that Wilson regularly violated other countries’ rights to self-determination in order to strengthen his own country. When Wilson was in France, supposedly negotiating for democracy and peace, he met with Ho Chi Minh, the future leader of North Vietnam. Wilson ignored Ho Chi Minh’s pleas for Vietnamese self-determination, and agreed to allow France to retain control of Vietnam. Wilson’s dismissal of Ho Chi Minh brings up another point about his life that textbooks ignore: Wilson was one of America’s most racist presidents. His recent predecessors appointed black Americans to relatively important offices; Wilson, however, did not, and even made a point of appointing “Southern
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Whites to offices traditionally reserved for blacks.” Wilson was the first president to segregate the navy, and routinely told offensive stories about “darkies” during his cabinet meetings. He was also a fan of The Birth of a Nation, one of the most racist major movies of all time, and his enthusiasm for the film, which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan, was probably a factor in encouraging the organization’s growth in the 1920s. Textbooks rarely offer more than a sentence or two on Wilson’s racism—an omission that is, itself, racist. African Americans couldn’t possibly consider Wilson a hero, and yet textbooks routinely treat him as one. Textbooks also ignore some of Wilson’s other bad decisions. For instance, during World War I, Wilson was known to have supported the Espionage and Sedition Acts, which limited Americans’ rights to free speech and banned almost all public criticism of World War I. However, textbooks usually imply that Wilson just “went along” with Congress on the Espionage and Sedition Acts, even though there’s no historical Acts, even though there’s no historical evidence for such an interpretation. For decades, Michael Frisch, a professor at the University of Buffalo, has asked his students to name the ten most important figures in American history before the Civil War; invariably, his students name Betsy Ross. Betsy Ross’s continued fame is perplexing, since it’s now known that Ross, contrary to popular belief, didn’t sew the first American flag. Frisch posits that Betsy Ross remains famous because she fits Americans’ need for a strong “archetype”—a “mother of our country” figure. Perhaps the continued popularity of Woodrow Wilson illustrates our need for another archetype: a strong, idealistic, clear-eyed leader. The problem is that, instead of complicating and challenging naive archetypes, history textbooks reinforce them. Why don’t textbooks tell the truth about American “heroes?” Recently, a major textbook editor privately said that “sex, religion, and social class” are “taboo” in history textbooks. This is an astonishing statement, because sex, religion, and social class are vital aspects of history. By leaving out Keller’s lifelong war against the American class system, for example, textbooks decontextualize Keller’s life work and make her seem boring. Textbooks may likewise omit Wilson’s racism because they want to be respectful or patriotic. Ironically, by portraying Keller, Wilson, and other historical figures as unambiguously heroic, textbooks make student less impressed with these figures, not more so. Today’s high school students, when asked who their historical heroes are, rarely choose figures such as Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Christopher Columbus. Indeed, some students tell cruel “Helen Keller jokes”—not necessarily because they hate disabled people, but because they want to make fun of the “goody goody” hero about whom their teachers have lectured. If students could learn the truth about Keller—the risks she took in her life, and the controversy that she aroused—they’d be more likely to treat her as a real role model, rather than a punch line.
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Analysis

One important reason why students don’t “connect” with their history textbooks is that the human beings depicted in the textbooks are uninteresting—usually, they’re either one-dimensional heroes or villains.

In a few sentences, Loewen paints a vivid portrait of Helen Keller: she comes across as a vivacious, energetic woman who was deeply committed to social justice. Loewen’s point is that nowhere in the average high school history textbook would one find a comparable account of Keller’s life—as far as high school students are taught, Helen Keller’s relevance to history ended in the instant that she learned how to read and write (when, in fact, it seems that Keller’s contribution to history only began with her learning to read and write).

Woodrow Wilson is best remembered for being the President of the United States during the Progressive era (often said to be when America became a much more liberal and inclusive society) and for leading the country through World War One, when he vowed to “make the world safe for democracy.” Yet in spite of his supposed commitment to human rights and democracy, it would seem that Wilson wasn’t sincerely committed to either value when they conflicted with US interests.

This passage is a good example of how history textbooks subtly omit and distort the truth without, technically speaking, lying. Instead of denying that Wilson did, in fact, approve sending troops abroad, textbooks merely argue that Wilson did so against his will, due to the influence of Congress. One particularly striking episode form Wilson’s life was his encounter with Ho Chi Minh, when Wilson once again proved that he wasn’t as committed to democracy and self-determination as some textbooks would suggest.

Wilson seems to have perpetuated racism in this country to the full extent of his power: both by enforcing specific laws and executive orders, and by “leading by example,” approving of The Birth of a Nation and sending an implied message of support to the Ku Klux Klan. However, this passage doesn’t address some of Wilson’s more liberal, tolerant acts as president—for example, appointing the first Jewish justice to the Supreme Court, the influential social justice warrior Louis Brandeis.

Again, textbooks don’t lie about Wilson so much as they either omit information about his racism or offer distorted interpretations of his actions (for example, the interpretation that Wilson reluctantly went along with Congress in supporting bans on free speech).
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While Loewen doesn’t necessarily agree with Frisch’s theory about Betsy Ross in particular, he argues that Frisch brings up an important principle: people want to believe in a certain version of the past, so they voluntarily distort real-life historical figures into semi-mythical heroes. The passage is an early illustration of a point to which Loewen will return at the end of the book: in a sense, ordinary people are as much to blame for historical errors as the textbook companies that perpetuate them.

In part, textbooks gloss over the truth about history and historical figures because it’s not always suitable for children. We’ll study a good example of this principle in the next chapter, about the life and work of Christopher Columbus—who, for some reason, usually appears in textbooks as a brave, idealistic leader.

Loewen’s key insight in this section is that by heroifying historical figures, textbooks make those figures more palatable, but also less interesting. Also, notice that Loewen doesn’t fault students for telling mean jokes about Helen Keller; as in the first chapter, Loewen blames the textbooks, not the students, for causing an epidemic of apathy. Loewen suggests that students are curious to learn about the past, but not when their textbooks offer up a dull, predictable, glorified version of the past.

https://www.litcharts.com/lit/lies-my-teacher-told-me/chapter-1-handicapped-by-history
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Youtube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNXD-NEoa2M

U.S.O. Bob Hope Troupe entertains U.S. soldiers on Bougainville during World War II. A view of Bob Hope at microphone singing his theme song "Thanks for the memories," with lyrics related to Bougainville.

Location: Bougainville Solomon Islands.

Date: August 2, 1944.

Historic Background: The Bob Hope Troupe on U.S.O. tour in the South West Pacific during World War 2. The troupe entertains U.S. soldiers on Bougainville, Northern Solomon Islands. View of Bob Hope at microphone singing his theme song "Thanks for the memories," with lyrics related to Bougainville. He stops and calls for Francis Langford to continue with the song, which she does. Hope then introduces Jerry Colonna, who sings and banters with Hope. Miss Patti Thomas is introduced next and sings more lyrics of "Thanks for the memories."

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