

**Asking Big Questions:
An Attempt at Uncovering and Inquiry**

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Background

I teach in an affluent public high school in Cornelius, NC. Our free and reduced lunch population is about ten percent and our minority population below twenty. We score among the highest ranked schools in the district on standardized tests and have a very active and well-subsidized parent organization. We do not experience many of the troubles characteristic of inner city schools. There are no gangs, fights, or teen pregnancies. This does not mean, however, that the unit I am about to propose is outside the realm of possible use for any group of kids. In fact, though the unit will focus primarily on the AP Government curriculum, I will make suggestions toward the conclusion of this unit about ways it might be used with students in any humanities class and on any level.

Rationale/ Introduction

Teaching school has probably always been a difficult endeavor. And the reasons for the difficulty are likely too numerous to recount here. But it is a profession that many of us are called to do no matter the barriers. Enough altruism to go around, it would seem.

The contemporary school system, at least in my district, has become more akin to a business venture rather than an academic enterprise. In my first faculty meeting at the high school where I moved last year we were told, "We are a data driven school." The idea being that our testing data predominates everything we do as professional educators. And no matter what we have to do we must submit ourselves to the acquisition of testing data via student performance on assessments and then commit to improving scores so that we prove to various powers that be that we are teaching our children. In other words, our bosses judge our performance based on the results of tests. And so we have our modern difficulty. Students and teachers are being asked to embark on a mission that suggests that standardized test scores and almost nothing else defines progress in education. It is, to say the least, a troubling notion.

In an atmosphere where testing is the center of our collective attention, there are certain consequences to the daily routine experienced by teachers and students. Teachers are being judged by the results of student testing and are therefore beholden to curricular standards that drive everyday instruction. Any movement from the prescribed timetable could cost precious time that should be devoted to pertinent information students

desperately need to prepare for the test. Students who want to pass their courses are being made to pay strong attention to studying for tests that could be the make or break of their academic careers. The dirty little secret in all of this is that no one wants to say that our classes are being made over to teach toward tests. That would be limiting intellectual freedom and counter intuitive to the classic classroom. But it is what we are doing. Students, teachers, parents, and everyone else involved know it is the case. The bubble test is our God and without unrepentant worship we will perish.

But there are even graver - possibly dire - unintended consequences. Teachers are selling out to the test. And why shouldn't they? It has become the number one way to judge teacher effectiveness and to compare oneself to colleagues, and it is being touted as one of the biggest factors in a new scheme to pay teachers for their performance. Teachers must then be wholly focused on presenting material in the exact way that students will be tested. I am no expert on subjects in math or science so I don't know if they would react more positively to testing, but I am sure folks that I know in the humanities are outraged. Teaching (that is to say, educating) is no longer about helping students develop a unique perspective or challenging them to think beyond the prospect of a "right" answer; it is to teach that there is AN answer and one they should be prepared to regurgitate come test time. Teachers must teach, re-teach, test and retest so that we are assured that we have hammered as much information into their brains as possible. We are never, ever concerned with long-term retention, which is to say, we do not seem to care that anyone has actually learned anything (that they can use it to improve themselves intellectually, socially, professionally). We want good test scores. If kids forget everything they have heard once the test is over, well so be it, the course is over anyway.

I should say that having reread this piece several times now I begin to wonder whether or not this has always been the case. I mean by my logic it would have had to be the case that at some point in public education we were concerned more with intellectual pursuits beyond tests but I am not sure that that is true. I suppose I would like to think that before all this standardization there was something more idyllic in an academic sense but I have no way of proving that. So I suppose what I am actually saying is that we have possibly never been really interested in learning for the sake of learning, something I think is very important.

Nevertheless, it is even more alarming that some of our students have become remarkably adept at taking tests and this may be the worst outcome of it all. They don't know anything but the answers they are taught to repeat and, in class, all they want from teachers is to know what answers to give. They are totally unconcerned with why it might be the answer. We have, in a sense, taught them that inquiry and learning for the sake of expanding their minds is unimportant. They want good grades and good scores because they want to go to good schools and get good jobs. Maybe that has always been the case, but I digress.

I was first struck by this last year. I had just moved to a new school where it was less than 10% free and reduced lunch and the population was being hailed by administrators, before any work was collected, as a group of serious high-flyers. They came from the “right” homes and were said to possess all the right tools. This was based of course totally on looking at testing data. I was shocked. I remember asking my Advanced Placement United States History class in one of our first meetings what the word predestination meant and a student said “ten commandments?” And that was not an isolated incident. Those kinds of answers continued pouring in. No one was thinking about what I was asking. They simply heard words and tried to come up with the nearest term they may have heard relative to the ones in the question. It was an eye opener.

And what about kids who do poorly on these tests? I also taught a group of so-called “standard” kids in a US History class. They were not enthusiastic about being in class or in school for that matter. But there was something strange in them that I had noticed in similar situations before. They were not dumb kids. They didn’t have the drive to get good grades, they would never study for a test, and they were never going to do any homework. But, and this is a big but (no pun intended), they asked lots of questions. They wanted to know the reasons for everything I taught them and a lot of stuff that I didn’t. So I was left in a quandary: Why do the so-called “good” kids do all the homework and get the grades but care so little to ask any questions and the kids on the opposite side of the tracks behave almost the complete opposite?

I have a hypothesis: the good kids know that they are playing a game and are working the best way they know how to utilize the system to their advantage. They know that the truth is that they don’t NEED to know anything. They know to repeat this pattern: memorize, regurgitate, forget it and move on. But the others, the “standard” children, reject the tests because somewhere early in their academic careers they didn’t do very well and our system started them down a track that essentially told them that they were “standard” kids and that they were somewhere in the margins when it came to academic prowess ‘cause the test told us so.’ It is a self-fulfilling prophecy for these kids. They don’t see any need to prepare for something that they cannot succeed in doing, so they reject tests, education and the lot. And guess what, we call these students “at risk” or “low flyers” or whatever because they are squares trying to fit into the round holes we have created for them.

So all this leaves us with some rather big questions. In this kind of an environment what can we do to foster learning for the sake of intellectual exercise and personal improvement? Is there a way to reach both the high and low flyers? In a culture where testing hovers over us like some kind of sun god can we somehow liberate the classroom without seeming to do so?

Word of warning: I am not going to use this unit as a forum to talk about the various ways that we can unionize and begin a rebellion against the system. But I am going to

attempt to bring together academic freedom and intellectual rigor with bureaucratic encumbrances and testing requirements. I hope that this unit will help me build a bridge between what I see as an educational world where there are canonized “right answers” to one where there are more and more intellectually driven questions. It just might be crazy but it just might work.

Over the course of the next several pages I am going to attempt to fuse together four strands of thinking into one cogent educational practice. First, I am bound to curricular restraints imposed by the College Board. So when I teach AP government, for instance, it is my duty to help students learn what it is the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has determined is important in this subject area. Second, I have long used a method of organization known as “criterion referenced objectives.” I believe that they serve my students well and I do not want to abandon them so I will include them as well. The last two are the trickiest. The third comes from recent literature in educational circles about a process known as ‘uncovering’ and a pedagogical method known as inquiry based learning. I would like to employ them both in this unit. They are predicated on the notion that students take control of their learning environments by engaging the material they are studying in a meaningful way and that the lessons learned are long lasting (but do not necessarily translate to bubble test assessment). Finally, and with relation to this seminar, I want to use the philosophies of some of the world’s greatest thinkers to force students to think deeper about the meaning of whatever it is we are studying. The goal is to simultaneously cover the material pertinent to the class title so that students can be successful on the test, but also uncover a more intuitive vision of what all of it means to the student in the context of their lives so that it might be a meaningful learning experience; an experience that gives them something to take with them once they leave the class and an experience that is student-centered and one that permits them to grow as intellectuals.

What I teach: AP Government Curriculum Breakdown

I think it is worth sharing at least a couple of examples of the kinds of things the College Board expects teachers to cover with their students as a sort of a guidepost for what I will be discussing later in the unit. So the following is an edited version of a couple of examples given by the College Board on their website. The bold headings come directly from the site but the explanations are totally mine. The numbered topics that follow are also directly attributable to the College Board.

The first unit is a consideration of the **Constitutional Underpinnings of United States Government**. Students must deal with the arguments that led to the formulation of the Constitution including excerpts of the federalist papers. This unit deals heavily with theories of democracy as well as European influence on the creation of the American democratic republic. I like to start this unit by dealing with the nature of government and pose broader questions to the class about the necessity, or lack thereof, for authority and

power in complex societies. To that end, I use Jared Diamond's *Guns Germs and Steel* to begin a conversation about where the idea for the creation of 'governance' might come from.

1. Considerations that influenced the formulation and adoption of the Constitution
2. Separation of powers
3. Federalism
4. Theories of democratic government

The next unit deals with American **Political Beliefs and Behaviors**. This is one of my absolute favorites dealing with causality in human (American) political behaviors. In many ways it is more psychology than political science. At the center of this unit is the concept known as *political socialization* – how people come to have the political beliefs that they have- we seek to answer the question, where do our political beliefs come from? I like to use animated films in this unit, like *Happy Feet*, to talk about political rhetoric in media and how that is one part in a larger sea of influences in our lives. We try our best to explain why people have differences of opinion. We then deal with political polling (what questions are asked, how they are useful or not) and how public opinion shapes the political landscape.

1. Beliefs that citizens hold about their government and its leaders
2. Processes by which citizens learn about politics
3. The nature, sources, and consequences of public opinion
4. The ways in which citizens vote and otherwise participate in political life

The next unit is on **Institutions of National Government: The Congress, the Presidency, the Bureaucracy, and the Federal Courts**. Students deal with things like a how a bill becomes a law, how budgets are created, and the make-up of the Presidents' cabinet. They also have to understand the various roles that of the President and members of Congress must play. They are required to understand the complex relationship between congress, the President, and the courts including a consideration of the oversight and functioning of the federal bureaucracy. In this unit I like to ask students to think about the nature of leadership and how complicated it can be. This unit deals heavily with various processes- law-making, budget making, deal making. To that end we do a project called Class Congress (I will include this in one of the appendices if readers are interested) to get them to get the feel of trying to make policies happen and how difficult that prospect is when you include such varied interests and opinions.

1. The major formal and informal institutional arrangements of power
2. Relationships among these four institutions, and varying balances of power
3. Linkages between institutions and the following:

Teachers must also deal with public policy, civil rights and liberties, voting and

elections, and political parties. For more on the curriculum teachers can visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/usgov/topics.html?usgovpol>.

How I Teach: Criterion Referenced Objectives (CRO's)

To teach the curriculum requirements that I have listed above I create criterion referenced objective units. In the AP government class there are four units that span the entire year. I will give two examples of them in appendix A and B, but first a short explanation. The objective system I use to compose discipline units was taught to me years ago in the Masters in teaching program at Winthrop University by Dr. Steven Million. The basis of the system is not terribly difficult. Objectives are written so that they require little to no additional explanation; they are instructive in and of themselves. They can be written on all levels of Bloom's taxonomy and therefore allow for differentiation of instruction. They serve both the teacher and the student in that they give the entire class a road map for the length of the prescribed unit. And they tell students, in most cases, exactly how they will be assessed; the objectives are the basis for the assessment. And last side note, they allow students to work at their own pace. Below are some examples of CRO's that I use in the AP Government class. All objectives are preceded by the headline, "Based on material presented in the class, the text, and supporting materials the student will...."

...compare/ contrast forms of government: authoritarian, totalitarian, aristocracy, direct democracy, democratic republic.

...complete the "What is Democracy?" project. You are to ask at least five (5) people this question and using the text pp. 8-14 write a short essay that includes an explanation of your findings and how those may or may not match the definition provided in the text.

...complete the following tasks with relation to **interest groups and lobbying**.

- Identify the different types of interest groups, explain what issues are most important to them and give an example for each.
- What are the characteristics and techniques of interest groups?
- Elaborate on the **influence interest groups, through their lobbyists**, may have on our elected officials and why this might be seen as troublesome to the democratic process. In addition, explain **what regulations** have been put into place to curb their influence.

...create a political cartoon and accompanying explanation that deals with the controversy over **reforming the nation's social security program**.

These objectives come from different units but I think are great examples of the kinds of things objectives can help a teacher accomplish. They range from the fairly simple compare and contrast type exercise to the more difficult task of evaluation and synthesis of knowledge. I think they work well for the class because they break down the full volume of material into much more easily consumable parts; a kind of curricular compartmentalization. They also allow students to work methodically from one to the

next without becoming too bogged down in mountains of chapter review/guided reading sorts of exercises that really are more copy and paste than anything.

But I do not think they go far enough to help me reach my goal of achieving an authentic learning environment. I am not even quite sure what that looks like but I know this; when my kids leave my room I am not confident that they actually know anything we have talked about. They might be able to spit back to me things that have been said but are they meaningful? Can my students apply our lessons to their lives? I have come to realize that students can work their way through the objectives very well and make high marks in my class but I am left wondering and worrying about whether any of it has made a significant personal and long-lasting difference. So what to do next?

Uncovering and Inquiry

In an ideal world, students would come to class ready to engage your subject and ask lots of questions about things that they are interested in discussing. But for various reasons, some of which I hypothesized about earlier, they do not. But there is some research that suggests it is still possible even in a modern setting to make that happen. Next I am going to discuss two ideas that seem particularly relevant to this possibility.

The first is called “uncovering” history and the second is inquiry-based learning. Though they have different names and are separate ideas, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can, I think, easily be combined to bring about the wanted results, which is exactly what I aim to do. I am going to use the writing of Lendol Calder in an article from 2006 in the *Journal of American History* and ideas from the book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* by Sam Wineburg to explain these ideas. First let me try and explain the uncovering method.

Calder, in my opinion, rightly suggests that the common method for teaching survey courses in American History classrooms has classically been based on the precept that professors/ teachers need to “cover” all the material from beginning to end; that means most educators use lectures and reading-based discussions to methodically move from point A to Z, essentially telling students what it is they need to know. The problem being that the course may or may not “make any difference for students”.¹ By this Calder wonders, and I am paraphrasing, whether students have acquired knowledge about how to think historically, and if they have come to empathize with the past, and if they have, after the course, any understanding of why they learned what they learned? All of which is to say, Calder wants to know if they have gained anything from the course other than credit?

Wineburg agrees in chapter three of his book when he scolds the educational establishment for rarely looking at instances of teaching, “where real learning takes place.” He suggests a process where a kind of unlearning takes place when students

“construct their own narratives that constitute ongoing conversations about the past” and are not involved in a simple retelling of questions already answered.²

Both Calder and Wineburg subscribe to this idea that students must be looking for their own answers in order to achieve anything like what we might call learning; in other words, if students are either being fed answers by a teacher or finding answers told to them in a textbook that they would not know anything for themselves and that students must be asking questions that are arrived at by student-driven interest. And herein lies the rub: how do you get kids to ask questions (and good questions) when they are so accustomed to listening to answers or learning processes by which you get right answers? A couple examples from the readings here are instructive.

Calder gives the example of a first or second year level American History survey class in college on the first days of class. Instead of giving an introductory lesson or assigning a set of readings with guided review questions, Calder says that he asks students to write a two to four page history of the United States without doing any research. The students are to simply write what they know. The next step is to talk about what they know. Some profound questions then emerge; what sorts of perceptions are there about historical events? Might there be any myths in what students are retelling? How do we know what we know and where must we fill in the gaps? How much don't we know? The rest of the semester is a series of activities where students are made to fill in those gaps. But more importantly, they decide upon the gaps they want to fill. They begin to drive their own learning because they WANT to know certain things about what they thought they knew.³ It is too exhaustive to recount the entirety of Calder's approach here but his example serves as a lesson for my unit. Students must first recognize what they don't know or don't understand before they can begin the process of uncovering information. I think that they need to realize all that they don't know!

Wineburg describes a high school class that is far more akin to what I deal with in my AP class and seems to be a bit more doable for my population. The lesson in this particular case study is about using debate as a way to teach students about the colonial rebellion starting around 1763 that resulted in American Independence. But it goes well beyond this narrow subject. In his example, Wineburg describes a teacher who has the prescience to understand that the common theme of 'rebellion' that will wind its way through the American History course she teaches and knows that the reading and analysis of primary documents will likewise be important to her student's success.

So this debate involves teams of students that represent the two sides of the argument (loyalists and revolutionaries) but also includes a group of students who act as judges for the debate. The teacher gives them links to certain primary documents and spends a great deal of time floating from group to group as they do research and compile their arguments. She becomes the “invisible teacher.” Students are responsible for framing an argument as they carefully scrutinize primary sources and prepare to debate. All of them

have a stake in the process and the teacher is the facilitator. One would hope that they learn to both recognize the specific problems of the American Revolution while concurrently striking at the core of rebelliousness itself: why do people rebel and what justifies rebellion? But beyond even this is the atmosphere for inquiry that is created by the exercise. Students must have knowledge of a subject to the degree that they can present a cogent argument and/or understand the argument of the opposition (in the case of the justices both). Therefore they must be inquisitive enough to ask deep questions about what they are reading; what do the sources say and how can they as students manipulate them to their advantage?⁴

I think it is worth pointing out that these activities are both likely to have built in pitfalls since they both might require a heck of a lot of work on the part of the instructor depending on the population of the class. They might also take more time than teachers can afford with respect to the amount of material they must cover. But beyond that I think they give us an idea of the direction we have to go if we want kids to start to think for themselves and about themselves. Calder's example suggests that students might ultimately begin to reconstruct history based on an assessment of their prior knowledge and then shape their own historical study based on what it is they need to know. Wineburg's example suggests that students can be responsible for their own learning in a way that serves many different needs; building analytical skills, modeling investigative learning, empowering students to think for themselves, and promoting the idea that those arguments often end with no answers. But they are very closely related and perhaps, for the purposes of this unit, not necessarily in need of being differentiated because they both ask students to actively engage in their own learning process.

Philosophy in the Classroom: Uncovering and Inquiry

Thomas Nagel writes in his book *What Does it All Mean?* that the study of philosophy "lies in certain questions which the reflective human mind finds naturally puzzling."⁵ These are normally timeless sorts of questions like the meaning of life and death or the nature of right and wrong. But they can range into the freakishly abstract if you want to consider things like "do you think a thought?" or "how do you know that you are actually living and not in a dream?" But no matter what, philosophical questions like these pose a very specific kind of problem for us because they cannot be answered scientifically. The answers that we decide upon are based on beliefs that we derive from a sense of what we want the answers to be. That can be frustrating or liberating depending on how you choose to look at it. For my purposes as a teacher the frustration and liberation can make for very important moments in the edification of a student. Wrestling with the philosophical could in fact be the key when trying to get students to engage subject material. In education terms, they could be my "hook."

The problem is taking the philosophers and their philosophies and making them work in the classroom. Here are a couple of examples that I think might work. Remember that I

am bringing a number of elements together here and I will try to demonstrate this by methodically moving from the CRO to the big question and then to the material for the objective. Afterward I will give a few short examples of other ways we might think about philosophy and AP Government. Here is the objective for my students, which comes from Unit Two of the course.

*I... understand the idea of **political socialization** by completing the following tasks:*

- *Define public opinion and what it means when it is consensus and what it means when it is divisive.*
- *What is political socialization?*
- *Explain how each of the following might have an effect on political orientation: region, race, gender, media, family structure, religion, wealth/ occupation/ social class (these all have some relativity to one another), age, education.*

Step One: Read the story the “Ship of Theseus”

The story goes (roughly paraphrased) that a guy named Theseus builds a boat and he uses this boat to travel and trade on the high seas for about 100 years. Each year he takes planks from the boat and throws them out to sea while replacing them with new planks. Eventually Theseus has replaced the entire ship with new planks but all the while another traveler has gathered up each plank and put them together in the exact way Theseus had originally done with his first ship. So which of the two ships is Theseus’ ship?⁶ My kids will read this and discuss possible ways to approach the question. The philosophical root of the question deals with a question of identity and can lead to questions about personal identity; how do you know you are you? (Followed if necessary by) Are you the original you? Are you some form of you? If you always change is there ever anything we might call a permanent you? If we took out your brain and put it into your best friend’s skull which one is you? If you are your memories and you lose them, are you no longer you? Obviously these are some very difficult and puzzling questions about identity and they can be mind twisting and perhaps even a bit frustrating. But they are important. This is, I have to believe, a meta-cognitive exercise beyond anything they experience in the normal day-to-day class setting. But NOW I have got them thinking! More importantly, and for the purposes of my class, I have them thinking about how they have become what they see as ‘self’.

Step Two: Uncovering – what do you believe?

The question of who we are is significant to the study of political behaviors. Political scientists have long studied political patterns of behavior and out of that study there is an ever-developing concept known as *political socialization*. It means that people are essentially political beings not necessarily by their own choices but as a byproduct of many different contextual circumstances, beyond their control, that combine their

experiences, education, and other types of influences, all of which eventually molds them into a political character. These include the make-up of a person's family, the socio-economic background (occupation) of that person and their family, the geographic or regional placement of the person and family, their religious affiliation (or lack thereof), race and ethnicity, and the length and depth of education of that person (and family). The theory insinuates that people are not originally anything politically but are ever-changing political beings that are molded by a series of influences over the course of their lives (the problem of Theseus ship).⁷ Having considered who they are in a deeply philosophical sense it will now be our charge to discuss who they are in a political sense.

Since many of my students are not energetic consumers of current events and actively engaged in the formulation of political opinions, I need to be aware of just where this lesson should next tread. With that in mind I could ask a series of fairly simple political questions like, "do you believe in the death penalty as a justified punishment?" and "do you think abortion should be legal?" and "do you think homosexuals should be allowed to legally marry?" and "do you think America is ever justified in beginning a war to protect its interests?" and "should we crack down on illegal immigration?" and "should we make illicit drugs legal?" and "should we have insurance to help the poor?" **But** if I want them to experience '**uncovering**' in a way more relevant to what Calder suggests I might ask them to write a simple political biography giving details about the issues that are important to them. The first is a bit more directed but not terribly so. But I think the second is more where my interests lie. They need to think about what they think is important before we can get to the AP materials I described heretofore. The most important jump in this exercise, however, is the next one; "Can any of you tell me why you think the way you think about those issues?" Now we have traveled from the question of personal identity to the question of political identity.

Step Three: Making it personal through inquiry

So after a short introduction to political socialization (careful not to go too far lest I become counterproductive to this unit) I ask students to look into who they are as political beings and attempt to deduce how they arrived at the, albeit youthful, political perspectives they embrace. This is **inquiry**. They must find the people in their lives that have been most instrumental in their political upbringing. They must interview parents, grandparents, friends, favorite teachers; anyone who they think has been a major influence in their lives thus far. They will likely encounter race and ethnic background, religion, occupation of mom, dad, other, economic status, where they have lived most of their lives as elements of this process. I want them to construct the interview questions, of course, because that is the essence of inquiry. I am reluctant to not give some direction, however. This would probably be contingent on what I judge the ability level of my class to be, but if the students are high functioning I might simply tell them that in forming their questions they need to find out why the people they choose to interview believe what they believe. If the class is less capable I might try a number of things. It might

require that I add a few more questions to the mix or I might need to do an open analysis of myself in front of the whole class before sending them off to work on this project because it could give them some direction and may clear up any misunderstanding. If the exercise works as I intended it would seem that I have taken a totally abstract philosophical question about self-identity and, after my students engage in uncovering and inquiry, attached it to the curriculum of the AP Government class – and completed the objective for the unit. One would hope that the curriculum requirement to teach political socialization and political behavior during the course has now been made personally relevant to my students.

Free Will or Determinism

Part of the AP Government curriculum requires students to understand the foundations of our development as a Democratic Republic. This involves a consideration of several key issues. First, students must consider the arguments over the formation of a constitutional republic between federalists and anti-federalists. Students must also be alert to the kinds of political philosophies being used to supplement both arguments that include things like John Locke's insistence that there existed (exists) something called 'natural rights' and Hobbe's insistence on creating governments that have three branches which would check and balance one another to prevent tyranny. Kids should also be aware of competing theories of democracy like direct democracy and republicanism. Added to this, students must know about various theories of systematically instituting a democracy like pluralism, elitism and majoritarianism.

I think deep within these concepts lies a philosophical debate about free will and determinism. Many of the political philosophers of the time, indeed the founding fathers of this country, seemed to believe that they were living through an era predetermined by a greater power. Not to say that they were necessarily religious zealots (Jefferson certainly was not) but that they felt conditions were perfect in the post-enlightenment world and that the decision to change the human condition for the better was left in their hands. People, after all, were "endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights." And those rights had largely been ignored by western civilization to that point. But was this all predetermined? Is it in fact plausible to suggest that God was instrumental in the creation of the United States?

Given this one might choose to begin class by asking the simplest question; was it fate that America be formed into a successful nation or was it simply a matter of free will? Thinking back to Calder and Wineburg earlier in the unit, it might be plausible with AP students to ask them to uncover an answer to this question. But it would also involve them being able to ask/inquire about the right kinds of things before they could get to an answer. I actually experimented with this at the beginning of the year as a way of preparing to write the unit. Though I taught a bit more about the foundations of our government than is implied in what I have just written, ultimately I asked students to

formulate an argument to this exact question using Madison's Federalist #51, parts of the Constitution, and a couple other supplemental secondary materials (included in the bibliography), but this was more assessment than assignment.

Caves or no caves? That is the question

Also consider the possible utility of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. So Plato asks us to imagine that there are prisoners locked in a cave facing a wall. The light from the sun shines behind them onto the wall projecting shadowy images of people doing various things. So the prisoners grow to believe that the shadows are in fact reality. That is their world because that is what they physically see. But then one day a prisoner breaks free and turns and faces a new reality. He explores the world that none of the prisoners ever knew. He then returns to the cave to explain to the others that what they are seeing is not in fact reality at all and advises them to break off their shackles so that they too might see. They reject him and castigate him for mocking their beliefs refusing to abide by his "rebellious" notions.⁹

Plato believed that there was something called Truth, an idealized version of everything that we know that most of us do not recognize because we do not spend the time thinking about (as philosophers do) what is the truth. That we were initially aware of the "idealized versions of knowledge" but now know only our perverse versions of truth because we are "blinded" by our material bodies. Therefore, the cave dwellers see a version of reality and because they lack the courage, insight, or ability to see beyond the shadows on the wall will continue to be prisoners to a fallacy. Plato is, in his own way, encouraging mankind to get out of their caves.

The study of American government and politics is filled with allusions to "caves." Ideologies like liberalism and conservatism could be considered caves. Political parties might represent their own kind of caves. The media, indeed, the television itself might as well be its own cave. So I don't think it's hard to imagine using Plato's cave allegory as a way to teach any of these.

Here is one idea. After reading and discussing Plato's cave (and perhaps before if that suits you), what if we asked students to make an argument counter to everything that they believe? Students might be asked to write a political speech, as if they were candidates for the party they least identify with and in that speech make clear, in the most persuasive way possible, their views on important issues. Teachers could use this both as a method for uncovering and inquiry: students must uncover all that they don't know about the opposing party or ideology by asking the right kinds of questions in order to write and deliver the speech. I would imagine that I might use this as a way to teach ideologies, political parties, and maybe public opinion.

In the end, I think what has become apparent to me, as I have written this unit, is the

idea of 'reversing' the classroom. If I want to teach something I need to think about how I can get kids involved in teaching themselves, not to undo my responsibilities but because I want my students to learn. And in order to do that I think they must engage in ways that are not customary in the classroom. Life, as far as I have seen, is not a multiple-choice question and even if it is, rarely gives us the right answer choice in a key! Philosophy can be tough because it is so nebulous, but most things are: relationships, rules, politics, and the universe, to name a few. I hope this unit will help me challenge students to search for answers, knowing that they will be elusive and sometimes impossible, but because the journey we take in trying to get there is more important to our intellectual development than the answers we seek.

Endnotes

¹ Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* (2006): 1358-1372, vol.92, no.4.

² Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), chap. 3,7.

³ Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* (2006): 1358-1372, vol.92, no.4.

⁴ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), chap. 3,7.

⁵ Thomas Nagel, *What Does it all Mean?*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

⁶ North Carolina University, "Ship of Theseus." Accessed October 27, 2011. <http://www.unc.edu/~megw/Theseus.html>.

⁷ James Burns, *Government by the People*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 2002), chap. 8.

⁸ Joanne Robinson, (seminar fellow), interview by Jeff Joyce, UNCC "Asking Big Questions," October 25, 2011.

⁹ "Plato's Allegory of the Cave." Accessed November 28, 2011. <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/allegory.html>.

Annotated Bibliography

Calder, Lendol. "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History

Survey." *The Journal of American History*. (2006): 1358-1372. Professor from Augustana College challenges teachers to think about how to teach American History from a new perspective. Primarily the concern here is that teachers not seek to cover history in the conventional manner but develop strategies which allow students to think as historians and uncover it for themselves.

Cathcart, Thomas and Klein, Daniel. *Plato and Platypus Walk into a Bar*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. It is a nice short consideration of almost all of the major philosophies in the history of the world. Put together in nice short chapters by theme and includes jokes that give insight to the meaning of each kind of philosophy; like metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. This would serve as a perfect introduction to the discipline for both teachers and students.

Gaarder, Jostein. *Sophie's World*. New York : Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1994. This is a far more intricate consideration of all the philosophies of history but put together in a unique style. It is a novel in which the main character, Sophie, discovers all this material through a mysterious teacher who woos her into curiosity and leads her down a twisting path of intellectual intrigue. Not the easiest to read because of the detail given to each of the great philosophers; however, it is thorough and thus more meaningful to a clearer study of philosophy.

Nagel , Thomas. *What Does it all Mean?*. Oxford University Press, 1987. The best of all the books we read for this seminar. It is very short but also very thought provoking. It was easy to read but also challenging in its presentation of great philosophical questions. I highly recommend this one for anyone first engaging this subject.

Wineburg, Sam. *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. Wineburg is an education professor from Stanford and in this book he challenges teachers to work toward methods of teaching not unlike Calder's uncovering method. In particular, Wineburg gives the reader a number of classroom scenarios as examples of how we might think differently about teaching history.

Appendix A

AP Government
Unit 4 Objectives

The courts and our civil liberties

Based on information provided in class and in the text the AP Government student will...

1...read the *American Polity* in part 8 eight on the Judiciary and *All the Laws But One* (Rehnquist) chapters 14,15, and 18 then write short 4 to 5 sentence paragraph reviews of each article or chapter.

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- 2...define and distinguish between the **eight (8) different types of law**, give examples when possible.
- 3...explain how each of the branches within the **American court structure determine jurisdiction** of any given case.
- 4...**identify the following ten (10) terms**: justiciable disputes, class action suits, magistrate judges, plea bargain, public defender system, judicial restraint, judicial activism, writ of certiorari, amicus curiae, opinions of the court.
- 5...**choose a court case of particular note that you and a partner can re-enact**...each person should choose a side within the case (for instance US v. Nixon someone would argue for the federal government and then the other for Nixon's executive privilege), research the case and do a minimum 10 minute presentation that illuminates the central arguments. This should not be a regurgitation of cases we already know and are intimately familiar with...you should test yourselves to seek out those that are new, and perhaps, a bit more challenging.
- 6...evaluate the courts of **Marshall, Taney, Warren, and Burger** in the following ways: a) give at least 2 cases of significance during their tenure b) explain what precedents were set for subsequent consideration during this period.
- 7...respond to the following questions related to information on civil rights and civil liberties found in chapters 16, 17, and 18:
- What 3 original rights were guaranteed in the Const.?
 - What is selective incorporation?
 - Why have prayers at football games and federal funding for parochial schools been so controversial and what constitutional issues are at play here?
 - List and explain the several ways that speech is defined and restricted.
 - What restrictions are federally placed on media and why?
 - In what situations can property rights be altered?
 - What is the difference between procedural and substantive due process?
 - What restrictions are placed on police/ government when attempting to accuse, charge or arrest someone suspected of committing a crime?
 - What constitutional classifications are used to test equal protection and due process?
 - Give four (4) examples of legislation meant to enforce equal rights under the law.

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