

SCRIPTED CURRICULUM AND ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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In my teaching career, I have found that scripts are like old paper road atlases that, as a young driver, I always had in my car. They are useful navigation tools to adapt to my classroom environment, not a script that is blindly adopted for a reality that does not exist (Timberlake et al., 2017). My course in American history is a vehicle for my students and me to explore the world and our shared histories. Our map is the Ohio model curriculum. My goal is to teach them to understand how the map works in order to see how history has developed to the present in order to navigate the road they will drive on as self-governing, democratic citizens.

While the script, or content standards, can be utilized as a guide, it must be applied to the road as it is because that old paper atlas will not predict the weather or warn you of the potholes, traffic jams, or speed traps that lie ahead. The script will not help me get all my students where they need to be in order to learn—in order to feel connected. The use of innovative technology, like GPS, can be an upgrade to old methods, but attention and critical thinking are required in case it tries to guide you into a lake. Learning did not magically become easier with new technology; we just have new tools. Scripted curriculum, such as that used by the “No excuses charter schools” do not teach democratic engagement centered on civil discourse and civic engagement. Instead, they apply rigid scripts that foster compliance, social control, surveillance, and punishment—the antithesis of a self-governing citizenry (Golann, 2021).

Ben-Peretz and Flores (2018) argued that education should provide access to common knowledge and critical thinking skills that are tailored to students and their communities’ unique cultural contexts. I teach my course in a school community that touts itself as one of the most diverse public high schools in the state of Ohio. I often teach pupils from different racial, ethnic, and religious contexts with a variety of documented IEP, 504, and ELL accommodations. A rigid script simply will not meet the learning needs of my students. In order to be an effective educator, I cannot deny the diversity of my students. I have a legal and civic duty to provide them with equitable learning opportunities. I shape my content to be inclusive so my students can see themselves as historical actors who, one day, may exercise their own agency as responsible democratic citizens. To do otherwise would be a rejection of their dignity and a disservice to their education.

Neo-liberal education policies propose that market-based privatization initiatives, focused on school choice and accountability, will result in a more effective and efficient education system than the public school’s status quo. Harris (2023) provided an economic-based analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of the market-based voucher approach. He found that the structure and function of schools in a market-based approach do not meet the assumptions required for efficiency under effective free markets systems. He argued against the use of market-based solutions for schooling due to the negative impacts the choice has on the school community, a lack of access to good information about schools, a lack of options for parents and students, the economic burdens caused by switching schools, the lack of flexibility in the demand for schooling, and the lack of the ability to monetize intellectual property. Harris (2023) demonstrated that school systems and the pupils they serve are too complex and unique to apply market-based philosophies; thus, when implemented, these philosophies have resulted in unequal educational outcomes.



Neo-liberal scripts that are disconnected from the communities they intend to serve and the pupils they propose to educate take away the creativity and joy of learning. The truth of the matter is that humans are not computers, and their knowledge cannot be assessed through a battery of tests. Intellectual development is about giving in to a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world—navigating the complexity of the world with a community in order to solve real world problems. A teacher must create a learning environment conducive for this learning by inserting joy. As Poetter (2006) argued,

the joy in teaching comes from the exercise of our passion and the remaking of our passion into learning by students ... [through] collaborative, mutual ground of meaning-making, one in which the parties are free and equal, working toward completion of themselves, becoming all that they can. (p. 275)

A script cannot accomplish that task. In fact, it can suck the joy, creativity, and critical thinking out of the entire process of learning as the teacher relinquishes their expertise to the rigidity of an adopted script (Powell et al., 2017).

Lacking a legitimate free-market system, neo-liberal policies and the centralization of knowledge into rigid scripted curriculum will lead to an illiberal democracy—that is, a democracy that no longer represents the majority. Instead, it would reflect the monied powerful elite while the majority is taught compliance. This would be America’s version of an authoritarian state veiled in the colors of Old Glory as it hollows out our Constitutional institutions and collective social contract. On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, our national purpose, it is time for the American public to push back against corporate centralization of every human interaction and reclaim their rights to self-government. There is no better place to start than our public school systems.

FRAGMENT 1: THE DRIVE FOR MORE

I still remember my 8th grade homeroom and English teacher, Mr. C. He was a beloved teacher in my middle school. He had a number of scripts he adapted in our classroom. From reflections about the book, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), to the memorization of Robert Frost’s (1916, 1923) poems: “The Road Not Taken” and “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” Each year a different class, each year the same materials. He adapted the material to his pupils and encouraged discussions about what the material meant in our young naive minds.

He and his best friend and colleague, Mr. P, would perform SNL parodies of Hans and Franz at school assemblies as they encouraged students to be active, lift weights, and laugh. They would always dress up, sing, and dance to the band Creed in the hallways in the most cartoonish ways. This was a magnificent method for cracking through our middle school, pubescent angst and bringing joy to the schooling environment. I learned to seek joy in the predictability and mundaneness of our middle school scripts. Yet, one simple announcement from my middle school principal, “Teachers, please check your email,” disrupted the order of this schooling.

I was in the middle of taking an ISTEP test. As a perennial bad test taker, it was my least favorite part of the year—a week of filling in scantron tests with no genuine understanding of why I was doing it. I was caught in feelings of anxiety, stress, and insecurity as I questioned my own intelligence and capabilities. I always plotted how I could hide my scores from my “naturally

smart” peers. During these tests, the school was locked down like the “red door drills” that would become routine in my professional teaching career. The animal cracker snacks were nice, though.

But today was different than any other standardized test I had ever taken or administered. The principal broke a rule. He made an announcement during the test—a big no-no, break from the script and from the predictability. When the test was over, Mr. C collected all our materials. I remember a sense of fear and dread in his eyes as he said, “I don’t know how to explain this, but our country might be under attack. I am going to turn on the TV and answer your questions as best as I can.” The date was September 11, 2001. That day I watched 2,977 people die on live television.

It was a moment in time that everyone who experienced it will vividly recall. Panic, fear, and uncertainty gripped the American people. I wondered, how could this happen? What do we do now? My teachers gave me a sense of calm, that the leaders of our country would protect us from anything like this happening again. Reflecting upon that moment, I realized the instability of our world.

The rest of the day was a blur, but I remember my peers were panicked. They thought our small town, with a GE factory and oil refinery, could be next. I came to realize that a lot of Americans felt this fear amidst the chaos of the day. I remember my mother breaking from her script. For the first time ever, she knelt down with me to pray in front of the family bible. The gravity of the situation washed over me. Something terrible had happened, and it was not going away anytime soon. I learned the power of faith in a crisis.

Ultimately, though, the aftermath of 9/11 would be my break from the sense of normalcy of life. I just had not realized it, yet. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued that the end of the Cold War marked the triumph of western liberal democracy and free market capitalism as the perennial form of global governance. Through 9/11, though, history had come alive again. Change and uncertainty had taken hold.

I still remember President Bush’s (2001) news conference on October 11th where he tried to reassure Americans by hanging onto the “end of history” script. He told the American people they “have got to go about their business. We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don’t ... where we don’t conduct business, where people don’t shop” (para. 23). Shopping? We are really talking about shopping? Even in my adolescent brain, these words fell flat. They failed to reassure me; in fact, I was outraged. I was not trying to hang onto the past. I was searching for leadership to guide me on how we could meaningfully contribute. A self-indulgent trip to Wal-Mart did not seem like it would help.

The neoliberal fantasy that the only virtue and goal in life was to make money and live the American Dream was too shallow. Within the year, the USA Patriot Act (2001) would create the modern security state and militarize the police. Within two years, the Iraq War began, and I realized that sometimes those leaders I was taught to trust acted recklessly. The old scripts would not help. By the end of high school, I knew I wanted to be an American history teacher to inspire the next generation of citizens, not consumers.

American history has demonstrated time and again that, without a sense of collective security and communal cooperation, individuals are pressured to give into their fears and impulses that increasingly turn personal sovereignty over to a security state or centralized and ostensibly more knowledgeable other because the alternative is deemed too risky. We see ourselves as too ignorant or we simply fail to act. Amid this fear, I wanted to teach the courage of historical actors in our past.



FRAGMENT 2: AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION IN ANOTHER FORM

My first paid teaching position was in China. Graduating from college in 2010, there was no teacher shortage in the United States like the ones that nearly every state in the Union is experiencing today. In fact, neoliberal financial policies, which fetishized deregulation and free market principles in every aspect of human interaction, had crashed the global economy in 2008. Few were held accountable, with many bad actors getting a government bailout. Many teachers delayed retirement to recover their pension, 401k's, and home equity losses. School districts tightened their belts for the inevitable funding loss and some had to freeze hiring and wages. Main Street bailouts were an afterthought. It was a bad time to look for a job. So, I was left with the choice to live at home and work 60 hours a week as a substitute teacher by day and in-home care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at night or move to China to teach Oral English.

I chose China, thinking it would add perspective, experience, and credibility to my social studies expertise, which it certainly did. I opened myself to a new culture and place in the world where I was humbled to assimilate to the norms as a guest in a place that was completely different from my own upbringing, yet I found meaningful connections. I discovered joy in trying new foods and customs. I was privileged to meet new people and experience the community that the culture served. I understood much of what John F. Kennedy (1963) said in his American University Commencement address: "Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal" (para 23). In the local Chinese school where I worked, the teachers, students, and parents all strived and worked for what was best for their family and often their wider extended family. Yet, the stakes were high.

Anecdotally, I was told that many parents had to make the choice of spending their life savings on their child's high school tuition, in the hope they will make enough money to provide for their parents in the future or use the money for their own retirement. Often, the success or failure of this choice depended on a student's scores on the Gaokao national college admissions exam. This led to an immense amount of pressure on the students. There were stories about some schools placing nets outside student dormitories to prevent potential deaths by suicide. On my campus, during Gaokao testing, the school was locked down with armed guards as security checked the ID of every person who walked on or off campus.

Day-to-day, I interacted with students who asked for help in dealing with the stress and pressure as they studied nearly 20 hours a day, 7 days a week. I never had a great answer because I could not relate to being a teenager with the family's entire future on my shoulders. They were kids, but they had to grow up quickly. So, we practiced their English by talking about the NBA, Gossip Girl, and the WWE. I related to teenagers who were not all that different from the students I taught at home in America. Yet, their lives were entirely different.

I also heard stories of unaccountable students, one in particular comes to mind. This student may not have scored well on the Gaokao, but their family could afford tuition at any Big 10 University of their choosing. Following a semester of playing video games and skipping class, this student received an academic expulsion. Apparently, his father literally flew halfway around the world to speak to the dean and bribe him to allow his son to stay. At that time, the offer was rejected with contempt. With 15 years of neoliberal education policies to work their magic, I am unsure if the same could be said today. For many Chinese, this exchange would be a great dishonor to the family and their social face. Yet, regardless of culture, money and power often have the ability to hide many distasteful behaviors.



The hubris, corruption, scheming, and vice of our base human impulses highlighted in the historical documents known as Federalist 10 (Madison, 1787) and Brutus 1 (Brutus, 1787) are universal. In these documents, the founding generation argued whether a large republic could survive the tyranny of the majority, or passionate minority, that was willing to sacrifice the rights and freedoms of others for their own destructive self-interests. Federalist 10 argued that our large republic and its diversity of interests would save us from the consolidation of destructive factions, while Brutus 1 argued that it would be our downfall, as we would be governed by incoherent and unrepresentative laws of exceptions.

Historically, America has leaned on a notion of civic virtue in which we made the right choices for the benefit of ourselves and our community. We strived to give every child an opportunity to acquire knowledge in our public schools. We held those destructive to the communal interests accountable through the rule of law that was built through the representatives of the people's interest. Sometimes at a great reward. Sometimes at a great expense. It was never perfect. Yet, there was a consensus that we were trying to build something better for future generations. In our current neo-liberal form, our civic virtue has diminished into virtues of power and profit while we face the prospects of an illiberal democracy.

FRAGMENT 3: THE PANDEMIC DISRUPTION

When I returned home, I was relieved to be employed in the American education system that aspired to educate all students. While the Chinese education system was demanding, I felt that it was counterproductive as it placed so much emphasis on the result of a series of tests. I believed the pressures placed on students to memorize so much information stifled their creativity and sucked the joy out of learning. Lifelong learning would be fleeting as burnout became inevitable. I also believed that any perceived deficiencies in the American school system were due to America's goal of educating all students, something that the Chinese system did not attempt to provide. Sure, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top emphasized student test scores as the primary accountability measure for schools and teachers, yet I felt that high quality instruction that fosters the growth of knowledge and critical thinking would be reflected by those measures. I was naive. I would come to find that the inadequate funding of all public schools, the growing gap between the rich and poor, as well as the undermining of public schools by education profiteers would shatter any notion of an adequate or equitable public education system in the United States. The full realization of this reality would not come to fruition until nearly 10 years into my career as a public school teacher.

On March 12th, 2020, the wheels fell off of any notions of a useful script. I recall the buzz in the air because it was already coming through on social media.

"Is school going to close, Mr. Sanders?"

"I am not sure, just going to have to see what happens."

At the end of the day, there was an announcement: "All teachers need to report to the media center immediately after school." The Covid-19 pandemic had officially entered my reality.

The schools were closed, teachers were to pivot to asynchronous learning for the next two weeks, which turned into 3 weeks, then the remainder of the semester. Students were not allowed to fail a course. Scheduled online learning attendance was optional. Sitting in the comforts of my front porch rocking chair, with an exceptional group of students, I led an online AP exam review. We hung onto the student-teacher connections we built over the course of the year—connection



we did not know how much we would miss. We held a drive through graduation. I would not have a classroom full of students for another year.

The following year was all online learning, with a hybrid option by the end of the year. The changes to the learning environment were rapid and consequential. School relationships were severed, and distance was created. But the most severe impact was on the relationships that never formed over that year that could have, potentially, lasted a lifetime. There was no ah-ha moment in March when a student finally got it, no inside-jokes or pop culture banter that is inevitable when given the opportunity to interact with people over a long period of time, no story 20 years from now reminiscing about each teacher's quirks from freshman year—the one they tried to provoke, the one they could get away with anything, the one they were afraid of, the teacher who was exceptional at their craft. These human connections were severed by the security students were forced to find in their homes. The crisis of the present was prioritized over any possibility for the future. Everything seemed directed towards our immediate security and comfort. I often said that any teacher who liked the covid classroom didn't like teaching. It would take years to reconnect.

When it came to finding out when the pandemic would end or the science would catch up, reliable sources of information were difficult to find. Many Ohioans turned to the Governor's daily updates, "Wine with DeWine" as some would affectionately call it, as the governor provided more straightforward updates about the pandemic. He was not afraid to say he did not know while laying out how he would find out. He respected the expertise of health care workers and researchers. State and local sources provided reasonable and tangible ways we could help and be safe in our communities. Yet, the updates from the White House could easily be derailed by musings about injecting bleach, which just resulted in more confusion, fear, and anxiety. We were renegotiating the relationship between the citizenry and their government. Who is in charge anyways? Where is our source of stability and hope coming from? The world was spinning so much faster.

By the summer, when the George Floyd and lock-down protests began, I realized that everything was being called into question. No one was really in charge as local and state governments were simply responding to each crisis as it came. The science and research couldn't keep up, so research was rushed. Inevitable mistakes were made to meet the needs of the current crisis. The credibility of many institutions we used to depend on was lost. Anyone with an internet connection could now claim to be an expert.

The divisions in America were revealed by the prioritization of the problems we faced: Who's an essential worker? What businesses should be open? What about shelter, food, and health care for non-essential workers? What's the social distance space now? How long should we isolate before we travel? Where do you find tests? Should schools open? What about the health of elderly guardians? Teachers? Who decides? What are the best practices? Are the kids alright? Are we really talking about a party at an influencer's mansion? What's a Tiger King? It was a top to bottom crisis.

It seemed like no one wanted to be held accountable for the inevitable inefficiencies of our government. Our society was gripped by anxieties and fears that were previously unimaginable, yet in many ways became our norm. While the virtuous did their best to help and profiteers made a fortune, most of us were living in the middle. We lived life on pause. We survived day-to-day without much hope for what the future may hold.

As the hero worship of public educators and health care workers turned toward villainy, it was clear we would be held accountable for the pandemic failures. While coping with all the resource-shortage and trauma-based effects and training of the pandemic, a script was a welcomed



assistant—landing strip from crisis teaching. Yet, we did not understand that, by following a script, teachers were handing over their expertise, creativity, and agency in their classrooms.

The script was also a push for control, a “necessary” oversight by heavy handed politicians. Scripts emerged as a consequence of the fear and anxiety that ran throughout our society. The cooperation of the early days of the pandemic shifted to an atmosphere of confrontation and brinksmanship from parents who soured on perceived “DEI-wokeism.” Control was sought from lawmakers responding to fears and anxieties of their constituents. Control was pushed by education profiteers who saw a moment where they could attack the sanctity of America’s public school system to push their privatization policies. Social media companies gained control of students’ minds by profiting from their attention. The backlash had begun.

It is remarkable how much people have forgotten about the pandemic. My adult life will always be framed between pre- and post-pandemic periods like my pre- and post-9/11 childhood. As the country began to slowly open back up in 2021, the shift against public schools was clear as another round of culture wars would drag them through the mud.

The pandemic pushed America into a renegotiation of the boundaries between the individual, home, local, state, and federal government’s rights and responsibilities. The lines between the public and private sectors were blurred in this renegotiation. Yet, we the people, the public, have not had an honest reckoning that this renegotiation is happening. We are used to distrusting the public institutions that were designed to serve the public interest, not profits. Yet, there was a tangible transparency, through school board oversight and access to public records about what was going on in these institutions for people who cared to look. And now? We are handing over these public institutions to private interests with no transparency, accountability, or oversight.

We know that the profiteers are winning, and many want to wash their hands of it, to seek peace in a time of conflict. Similar to forgetting that the pandemic occurred, we do not acknowledge that we are losing our democratic republic and our public schools. The barriers of screen-based media, the stratification of trusted sources of information, and income inequality have led to stark differences in the lived reality of the people. Americans are divided more than we care to admit. We easily harp at teacher unions protecting “overpaid” and “unaccountable” teachers while we ignore technocrats traumatizing our children with their products, politicians profiting off their positions and access to information, or corporations price gauging consumers with substandard products. Yet, our future is never set in stone. But if we continue down this path, the learning environment of the majority of public school students is bleak.

PROGRESSIVE FRAGMENT: OUR NEOLIBERAL NIGHTMARE

The rational end to these neoliberal public education scripts is the same as any other institution based solely on the pillars of profit and power. Public education will lose its moral purpose, creating gaps between its goals and the needs of the communities it serves until it ceases to function and exist. Without equitable access to public schools, an illiberal political system could develop where government services are only provided to a minority of people with financial capital and socio-political power.

When society only values profit, the real working class puts in 60+ hours a week, takes advantage of every opportunity they have, and will still come up short. It’s the American dream, but it is simply not their dream. They are no longer citizens; they are merely consumers for

corporate profit (Harris, 2023). In the neoliberal nightmare, where everything is commodified, the working class's inability to afford their homes means they live under constant threat of being forced out of their zip codes (Vaughn et al., 2022). The wealthy and powerful set the policies for lower classes out of a misguided belief that they know what's best for them, that they can cut costs, and provide more efficient education with fewer teachers, fewer staff, fewer intervention specialists, and also more technology, more modules, more consolidation of power and choice into the hands of a few corporations that lack transparency and are inaccessible for parental and community critiques. Yet, it will be marketed as their choice. In truth, we will be complicit in our own demise as we disconnect our self-interest from our contributions to our nation as a whole.

For parents of students in large, urban school districts, they could soon live in school deserts where pupils will sit at desks in school warehouses and learn from AI teacher, they will be given a state voucher to purchase technology for unsupervised home schooling, better yet for cost savings and the benefit of profiteers. These students will learn to become the arms, legs, and senses of AI, which will interpret the world for them and teach them to behave on the behalf of technocrats who are deemed more knowledgeable and more capable of responsibility and self-governance. As commodities, humans will become more expendable than the technology they serve.

In the school warehouses, students learn to complete AI-developed modules and obey the adults in the room. With rooms of 50-100 students, these adults aren't teachers; they are compliance officers. The administrators aren't master teachers; they're software engineers. It will be the final, neo-liberal, silver bullet of "reform" that brings on the end of public education and ushers in publicly funded, private education software that advertises its ability to provide multi-cultural education prompts and assessments specifically tailored to the students' learning needs. It'll even be cheaper than teachers, for a while. It'll teach pupils rote memorization and how to clarify what the software wants them to know with no oversight, no human connection—just numbers for politicians to run on in November and money for private profit interests. Cheating or authentic learning will not matter as long as the test scores and profits continue to rise. AI will not teach students how to think for themselves, to cooperate with others, to negotiate, persuade, compromise, or build something new. The pillars of republican citizenship will be stolen from the masses. The working class will be controlled in order to protect the delicate system of profiteering that was created on top of the ashes of the New Deal and the Great Society.

In order to escape urban school warehouses, there will be an increased demand for private schools. Their tuition will be artificially inflated so that even with a state voucher and tuition assistance, without being burdened by massive debt, the price is still out of reach for the working class. This is by design. Privatization will squeeze every dime and every commodity (i.e., student) from the government and from the public at the public's expense. Learning will become a secondary concern. All that matters in this dystopia is profit, efficiency, control, and power.

Parents will not really know where the money goes or why it costs so much, but the State Report card and Google once told them that their neighborhood public school was bad. Social media and their neighbors told them they were bad parents if they sent them there. So, they did not even try to find out for themselves, until eventually the opportunity was gone and the school warehouses were formed. Now, it is a world of education where you either profit or are exploited. The remnants of the middle class from a bygone era will barely hang on by paying increasing tuition in order to provide their child with some semblance of hope for a better life.

In the suburban and rural bubbles, increasingly desperate parents will silently live paycheck to paycheck in order to afford ever increasing mortgages to keep their children in a school district



that they are told actually teaches students. These schools have teachers who are real human beings with real resources and are places where students can create and learn how to use technology as a tool for profit. They have community, alumni, field trips, organized sports, and extracurricular activities. They have a cultural legacy to build upon, something the school warehouses will never attempt to build. Students in these schools have the opportunity to learn leadership skills, how the political and economic system operates to their advantage, and see the possibility of an American dream. There is an actual opportunity to go into a trade school or college. If they play by the rules and stick to the script, a potential life beyond surviving paycheck to paycheck is possible. Outside of temporary entertainment, they are scared of the inner-cities as they present a threat to their dream.

The real working class that everyone pretends to be a part of will know better. They know that the taxes and policies are written for the top and that the rule of law and prison only apply to the majority at the bottom. The entitled are not accountable, but the majority have to be to survive. They will not dare speak up, though, out of fear that they could lose the opportunity their parents worked so hard for them to obtain. They must listen to their teachers and take advantage of every opportunity they are given for 20 years, without error, and maybe they will be able to escape the cycle of poverty (Love, 2020).

In this future, most teachers are too ignorant to see the exploitation around them. They are the product of a successful career in neoliberal education. Some teachers know but dare not say. With AI teachers, there is no more teacher shortage. So, the ones remaining who run the systems are always afraid of losing the salary and health care that keep their family afloat. The real teachers speak in codes to allow for plausible deniability, to pretend that they did not provide their students with knowledge of how the world actually works. That's forbidden. Knowledge of the system is only for the technocrats and elites who benefit from it. After public schools have been destroyed and commodified, there is nothing left but the exploitation of the system for the benefit of the powers that be.

While American history demonstrates that change is inevitable, it has become my professional vocation and civic duty to ensure that this future never comes into existence. Yet, this cannot be accomplished alone. Through my experiences, I have found hope in the belief that the human spirit will prevail as the neo-liberal illusion of efficiency and control will collapse under the weight of its own indignity, hubris, corruption, and vice. Communities and camaraderie develop out of subjugation—where families protect their children from exploitative systems and citizens come together to prevent the nightmare from forming in the first place. We can always pivot back to an education curriculum that fosters democratic values, where every citizen and student is able to contribute to the learning processes, away from the centralized technocrats and their presumed expertise (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020).

SYNTHESIS: THE DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

As an educator of American history, the hubris of authoritarianism that runs throughout our society must be met with a certain urgency in each unit I teach. The pandemic era's sense of urgency to meet the need of the immediate crisis never subsided. But, I must slow things down for my students. These illiberal tendencies have to be taught and balanced with the humility, resolve, and commitment to courageous contribution that many historical actors exercised throughout our history. Students have to see that our history is built upon a series of choices, not inevitability.

They also need the space to be adolescents, to figure out who they are and where they want to fit in this time and place. They have to see that, through their traumatic experience, they are in kinship with people who built our present reality. Whether it was disease, wars, social injustice, or economic calamities, there is a peace in knowing that tumultuous times have occurred in our nation's past and that people have managed to see their way through, with joy and pride along the way.

I always begin my course in American history through America's first trial by fire: The American Revolution. This was when the people of the colonies began to see themselves as citizens, instead of subjects. In this unit, I set up a historical conflict between civic virtue and civic vice that we turn to throughout our study of history. I frame America as a project that is never complete—a place where each generation grapples with the nature of their reality and leaves something behind for the next generation to build upon. Sometimes this is constructive, sometimes destructive. Nevertheless, the Declaration of Independence established our national purpose: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Jefferson, 1776, para. 2). The Northwest Ordinance is our national charter—a way to build a nation based on the values of the Declaration that would include sustainable, democratic communities centered upon republicanism, contribution, and education and be void of subjugation (Black, 2020). Finally, the Constitution is the government structure that each generation could use and build upon to strive toward a more perfect union. The changes to the constitution necessary for advancing our union can be seen in its subsequent 27 amendments, which represent a power for change that our current citizenry and representatives have forgotten about, at least for now.

For weeks, we discuss the founding documents in order for students to understand the peril that people faced in that time. They learn that some of the founders were virtuous statesmen, while others were monsters of human depravity, and some were a bit of both. Yet, that generation created a system where people could work out their issues through negotiation, consensus building, persuasion, and compromise—where they used the system to mitigate the fear and violence with which their time and experience were imbued. They placed a lot of our country's future upon the hope that the enlightened statesmen would carry the day and that the people would give in, as Abraham Lincoln (1861) once said, to the "better angels" of their nature (para. 37).

The history of the United States teaches us, though, that sometimes the monsters win, that vice and greed can carry the day. Yet the lesson is that we persevere. The war is never over. The project is never complete. The people respond. Through 250 years of United States history, hope has survived in its own little pockets, waiting to disseminate into the next movement or awakening of the American conscience. Oftentimes in our history, we the people are not united. Yet, time and again our history has proven that a unified America is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. Whether that power is utilized for virtue or vice is our collective project, perhaps the ultimate project-based learning challenge of our lifetimes.

In February of 2026, I was teaching a lesson on the First Red Scare, including the Red Summer and the Palmer Raids. At one point, while we are looking at the KKK marching down Pennsylvania avenue in Washington D.C., a 15 year-old student blurted out, "I hate living in this country."

It was quick, more impulsive than thoughtful, but I was ready.

Without hesitation, I looked her square in the eyes and responded, "No. I need you to listen and listen real good right now. That story was not over, and you can't ever let people like that

define who we are. Do not give them that power. Their hate and hubris will destroy them. If you believe in something better, go out there and live it.”

I saw the resolve in her face, the agency of a citizen, that the perspective was necessary.

Make no mistake about it, America is in a crisis, and our students know it. While it may bring temporary comfort and predictability, no synoptic script will get us out of our current cascading crises. In fact, students will reject the script and the authority of teachers trying to push it (Ben-Peretz, 2018). In our times of great fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, we will be lulled to give in to an impulse to seek comfort in systems of security, entertainment, and assimilation, but American history shows us that this is not the way. The legacy of America is ultimately in its trailblazers and their recognition and utilization of our greatest asset: our diverse people.

As a teacher of American history in these divided times, my script in 2026 is to show my students our history while trying to get through Ohio’s model curriculum so that, when the next crisis enters my classroom, these will be the moments where Hess and McAvoy’s (2014) “political classroom” is activated. We will, then, be able to practice civil discourse to engage in conversations that ask: How should we live together. We will apply the knowledge and skills from history to provide clarity in our chaotic present. These events will be when my students get to see if civic virtue is real or if this whole experiment is simply a selfish free for all.

As a public school educator, I believe that every student should have a sense of dignity and personal agency to decide what they want to be a part of in their lives, be it virtue, vice, or somewhere in between. The state should facilitate equitable opportunities in our public schools for our students to learn and grow into responsible citizens. The people should have choices built upon rational thought and an acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes. But, more than anything, I want my students to know without a doubt that they are needed in this place and time. I want my students to discover and rediscover our history so that they can build strong, self-reliant communities that can weather the unpredictability and dangers of the world (Valdez, 2020).

Absent the testing and accountability regime, the masses who actually believe in the love and dignity inherent in their humanity will find the courage to seek the solutions to our problems through themselves and their communities and to define and reclaim their American dream outside of the self-interested, neoliberal scripts that led them here. They will volunteer their time and resources to elevate the youth and connect them to neighboring communities. They will invest in something real and create a true legacy. Their networks can connect young people not simply to technology but to more knowledgeable others who also care about their human dignity and civic virtue. They can become people who see the value of money but reject profit as virtue. They will learn the joy of a sustainable life, away from the fleeting joy of materialistic consumerism and the emptiness it inevitably provides. The community provides time, space, and resources to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic in order to understand the perversion of the free market and strive to create something new and sustainable. We can repay the education debt that diverse communities across our country have suffered due to generations of underfunded and under-resourced education systems (Love, 2020).

We must invest our efforts to build an education system and curriculum closer to the justice, self-governance, responsibility, and humility found within America’s foundational documents. This project cannot be simplified into rigid scripts or modules because it has never been built or conceived before. The members of each community must look inward to decide what they value and build bridges to each other. When we overcome our fears and embrace courageous agency, we can build something better than the curriculum of the past. It will be different. It will reflect



the reality that students experience. It will engage our diverse communities. It will be inspiring. It will be truly American.

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