

NJS Presents**Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Teaching the Pandemic in the Social Studies Classroom*****By William Gorman****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i2.257>**

In this editorial, Professor William Gorman (an educator with 30 years' experience) explores the delicate but important matter of teaching the pandemic even as we are still dealing with its consequences, and provides a brief list of resources that might prove a useful starting point for educators.

There is plenty of literature right now to suggest that students of all levels are suffering from the effects of the pandemic. Some of the most obvious and ongoing elements are depression, fatigue, lack of socialization, and boredom. As educators of history, we have a definite opportunity here to turn what is a negative time for students into one of deeper analysis, considering that this era is not one in isolation.

Why not take the time to use the pandemic as a teachable moment? It is a normal emotional response for youngsters to assume, with no historical frame of reference, that this current medical/scientific situation is one that is unique to the present day. Kids do not realize that history is replete with examples of human catastrophe related to communicable diseases and epidemics. To give students a frame of reference at this time is most important. If they were able to realize that human history was full of examples where societies and civilizations had to deal with epidemiological disasters over which they had no real control, this would certainly help with their ability to deal with the present situation.

Lessons and activities of a historical nature on epidemics of the past would be most valuable for students to put today's pandemic into perspective and allow them to realize that they are not the only era to have been saddled with such a disaster. A compare-and-contrast approach would be a great method to employ. A first such example that could be utilized would be an analysis of the bubonic plague when compared to the coronavirus. Primary-source documents could be used to show students how the spread of disease occurred all over Europe, and how widely the disease impacted the population. Students could then be put in groups and asked to consider any commonalities they can see about the spread of the plague in comparison to how the current virus spreads and impacts the population.

An even stronger example to use for purposes of historical analysis would be the Spanish flu caused by the H1N1 virus. Pictures and primary sources could again be used to show the origins of the virus and demonstrate to students the spread and impact of the virus. Students could also be given historical subtopics to research, such as: spread of the virus, subgroups that were most affected, examination of the impact of casualties upon the economy, and how long it took for the epidemic to run its course. There could also be further opportunity to have students do research on the same elements of the coronavirus to show that although the current pandemic has been very serious, the historical period examples like the Spanish flu had even more impact from an economic perspective. It also might be interesting to remind students that preventative measures like masks were resisted even back then, as they are by some Americans now.

Analysis and comparison of the above examples would also be the perfect opportunity to have additional interdisciplinary opportunities in the classroom. Students could see the relevant connections between science (biology and epidemiology) and history. Examination of the casualty

figures in the above examples could also let students see the difference between geometric and arithmetic progressions of disease, thus increasing the connection to mathematics.

To make assessment outcomes (both formative and summative) for such studies could also be tied to critical thinking. Students could (having been exposed to primary and secondary sources, as noted above) be encouraged to write or do oral presentations that would enable them to use evidence to directly compare the above eras to the above historical examples. This would have the additional advantage of increasing student ability to synthesize knowledge and directly apply what they examined.

Exposing students to such lesson ideas would accomplish one more overarching end goal: The use of historical examination would allow and enable students to realize that their own life experience of the current pandemic is not one that has occurred in isolation. By giving students such historical context, it could also enable them to verbalize and express their feelings and reactions to COVID-19 in a more productive way. They will be more able to constructively deal with the current pandemic as we move ahead into a more hopeful future for the 2021–2022 school year.

Resources

<https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/flu-pandemic-1918>

This site of the National Archives has images and many links to content about the Spanish flu epidemic. The photographs are especially interesting and will give a very good sense of the epidemic's significance and spread. It also contains an online exhibit that would be valuable.

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2009/the-great-pandemic>

This site by the American Historical Association contains an overview of the Spanish flu pandemic and additional links to other resources, such as the Naval Library. There are also primary-source documents from survivors of the flu, as well as other photographic images that would be useful for students. There are also lesson plan ideas for teachers.

<https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/one-year-covid-scientists-are-still-learning-how-virus-spreads-and-why-disease-symptoms-vary-so>

This article on COVID-19 by the American Association of Medical Colleges looks at why the symptoms of the pandemic vary so greatly, and why the spread, even in 2021, is still not completely understood. Although the article is a little advanced, teachers can make good use of the content for discussion.

https://sciencejournalforkids.org/keyword/covid/?gclid=CjwKCAjw2ZaGBhBoEiwA8pfP_m9LK6GGSGWQnU0Gq82J1DcxZ9V3IaGRs-piUiLe8IhGa9_OKYYAdxoCfVUQAvD_BwE

This site contains articles for kids written by scientists on COVID-19. It discusses everything from the spread of the disease to vaccination. The articles are suitable for elementary and secondary students.

Professor Gorman had a career in public education as a social studies teacher and supervisor in the Freehold Regional High School District and has experience in curriculum development and writing and staff supervision. He has served at the State of New Jersey Department of Education in areas of HSPA test construction and was also one of those involved in the construction of the social studies curricular frameworks for the State of New Jersey in 2005. He has been a member of the Department of History at Monmouth University since 1986. His

areas of research interest include social studies education and curriculum; the federal budget; national security and politics. Besides being co-editor of The American Economy, he has written on national security and the federal budget, being published in the Oxford Journal Forum on Public Policy. In his time at Monmouth, he has taught Western Civilization, American History Survey, and Critical Discourse, and for the last five years has exclusively taught courses in American economic history. His latest book, a customization of The American Economy titled The American Economy from Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, is forthcoming from Kendall-Hart publishing.