For a minute it seemed as if the debate in my “Teaching U.S. History in the Secondary Classroom” course at a local university would devolve into a frantic shouting match. During our second class meeting the preservice teachers divided themselves into two opposing and antagonistic groups. The debate arose in response to my question: What narrative approach should teachers take in a U.S. history survey? One group, the majority, argued vehemently that teaching a triumphant, national narrative represented an oppressive act of forced assimilation that ignored the experiences of marginalized social groups. In response, a minority of students countered that without a shared appreciation of American concepts of freedom and democracy we would have no nation. As passions rose, I sat and wondered how this class and, by extension my profession, might develop a shared understanding about the best ways to teach U.S. history to adolescents.

In many ways the debate among these preservice teachers reflects the larger argument occurring in our nation. We find ourselves increasingly polarized and at odds with each other over the meaning of our nation’s past. Controversy over Texas’s social studies standards during 2010 and the equally intense conflict that exploded when the National Center for History in the Schools published standards in 1994 exposed deep rifts in American society. (1) These disputes reflect long-standing divisions between progressive and traditional approaches to history. Although no quick generalization can completely describe this divide, progressives tend to favor narratives that explore conflict in a pluralistic society while traditionalists support stories that promote unity by affirming consensus around core national values. (2) Recently, the OAH Magazine of History devoted an entire issue to exploring the “history wars” that have always existed in American culture. In the issue’s forward, Keith Erekson argued, “we must pay attention to the way details are placed within larger story lines. These story lines—persuasive historical narratives and interpretations—tell people which facts are important to remember and which are not.” (3)

As a teacher in a public high school, I have struggled to develop a story line for my U.S. history survey that would, as Erekson urges, “embrace the controversies and enrich learning.” (4) As a historian, I am drawn to stories that explore how Americans from different backgrounds have struggled for greater equity and opportunity in an unequal society. My interest in social history has shaped a pedagogical approach that seeks to promote my students’ sense of personal agency and their involvement as citizens in our democracy. At the same time I want my students to develop informed interpretations of the past that do not merely mimic my point of view.

Several years ago I became concerned about the undue influence my own political and social views might have on student learning, despite my efforts to remain neutral in class discussions. A young woman, who was an ardent prolife activist, wrote an essay celebrating Roe v. Wade as an achievement that provided greater liberty for women. While I did not have a chance to ask her about her response (it was a final exam), I worried that the story line I established in my course did not give her adequate space to engage in an authentic debate over questions about access to abortion, women’s rights, and the meaning of freedom. Over the next few years I began to look for a narrative framework that would allow students to construct interpretations of the past that were both democratically developed and historically sound. Rereading Eric Foner’s Story of American Freedom inspired me to contemplate how I might present a similar story line about the efforts of diverse groups to shape the meaning of our shared values. (5) After considerable experimentation I found that using the United States’ original motto, E Pluribus Unum, from many one, achieved this goal. As a narrative framework it created space where students could engage with history, each other, and their teacher in ways that promoted a strenuous but civil discussion about the meaning of America’s past.

E Pluribus Unum has served as the nation’s de facto motto since the adoption of the Great Seal in 1782. While it was officially replaced by “In God We Trust” in 1956 during the height of the Cold War, it remains a central, if contested, ideal in American society. President Barack Obama cited E Pluribus Unum as our national motto during a 2010 speech in Jakarta, Indonesia. His actions prompted Rep. J. Randy Forbes of Virginia to introduce legislation reaffirming “In God We Trust” as the nation’s official motto. (6) Because E Pluribus Unum remains an important statement of national purpose it has tremendous potential to serve as a unifying story line. Education professor Walter C. Parker argues that E Pluribus Unum promotes democratic citizenship education by recognizing that we are a diverse nation with a shared political identity. It poses a central question to students: “How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and which leave our individual differences, both individual and group, intact and our multiple identities recognized.” (7) While reconciling this inherent tension is not an easy task, the phrase provides students who hold competing visions of the nation’s past a common place to begin a conversation. Traditionalists can appreciate fealty to our national motto, while progressives can point to the conflicting aspirations of diverse groups that compose the pluribus. (Figure 1.)

Developing E Pluribus Unum in the U.S. History Survey

For the past five years I have organized my ninth-grade U.S. history survey course around the concept of E Pluribus Unum. Before diving
My opening unit on Reconstruction provides an excellent opportunity to develop this narrative framework in more detail. The idea of *E Pluribus Unum* becomes clearer as students examine how freed slaves, defeated Confederates, Radical Republicans, northern Democrats, and newly formed women's groups all struggled to shape the meaning of freedom, equality, democracy, and opportunity in the aftermath of the Civil War. As we transition into units on the West, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive era, we deepen our exploration about the different strategies Americans have employed to achieve their shared goals. For instance, students begin to recognize that even among social groups there is considerable debate regarding how to best achieve the American dream. The varied approaches of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul, or Samuel Gompers and Big Bill Haywood demonstrate the complexity and diversity of American social history.

*E Pluribus Unum* also helps students interpret political history. For instance, they can apply the framework to analyze the diverse ways politicians and political parties have sought to organize government and enact public policy. Not only do they compare and contrast the expansive vision of government power proposed by the New Deal with Ronald Reagan's vision of limited central authority, but they also explore the more complicated and nuanced approaches to federal authority presented by Richard M. Nixon's New Federalism or Bill Clinton's Democratic Leadership Council. Students come to recognize that although all politicians pay homage to our shared *unum*, they view those core values

into the content (our curriculum begins with Reconstruction), I set aside time to develop the contours of this narrative framework. My students spend the first two days of school trying to define for themselves what this Latin phrase means. On the first day of school I give each student a dollar bill—a tactic that immediately grabs the attention of anxious freshmen. I tell them that the dollar is their first handout for themselves as well as to interview an older family member about his or her definitions. (Figure 2.)

On the second day I place students into small groups to draft a consensus definition of each term. When each group presents other students are invited to question or comment on the group's wording. Most groups produce their definitions quickly and are surprised by the challenges that emerge from their peers. For instance, the group assigned liberty often defines the concept as being free to do whatever you want as long as you do not hurt someone else. However, students point out that contrasting views of liberty can lead to conflicts that are not easily resolved. Examples of conflict discussed in the past include the freedom of youth to travel under community curfew laws, the rights of gays and lesbians to worship freely in religious communities, or the freedom of the Ku Klux Klan to participate in “adopt a highway” road-cleaning programs. Our classroom debate helps students recognize that in a diverse nation coming to a consensus on what seems to be a common belief is not an easy task.

Once we have developed a working understanding of the concept, I transition into our first unit on Reconstruction. We begin by reading President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and I tell students to look for specific references to the *unum*. They quickly identify Lincoln's beautiful observations about liberty, equality, and democracy, and they are genuinely excited to see the concepts we just defined reflected in such an important document. I end the lesson by bringing their attention to Lincoln's challenge that “It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.” I suggest that Lincoln was not just speaking to the crowd assembled on November 19, 1863, but that he was also speaking to the ages and, therefore, to them. This experience introduces students to the organizing premise of my course: Contesting visions of our shared values shape American history, and *E Pluribus Unum* is an ongoing process in which they, as citizens, are vital and active agents.
from vastly different lenses shaped by both the context of their eras and the traditions they inherited.

While *E Pluribus Unum* focuses primarily on domestic issues, it can also help students develop a deeper understanding about the country’s diplomatic history. Whether they study the conflict sparked by the American Anti-Imperialist League at the end of the Spanish-American War or the consensus that emerged during the early Cold War, students can use this framework to understand better the influences of both unity and diversity in shaping American foreign policy. (Figure 3.)

Like all tools this narrative framework has limitations as well as benefits. Not every story in American history can be captured by a discussion about the tension between pluralism and unity. For instance, I often find it difficult to link international relations to my core narrative, particularly stories about war or U.S. conflict with other nations. As mentioned above, *E Pluribus Unum* allows for an analysis of domestic debates about foreign policy, but it cannot clarify the nuances of international relations. While I do not ignore stories about World War II, the Vietnam War, or the Iranian Revolution, many of my colleagues give those topics much deeper treatment. It has not been an easy decision to reduce my focus on foreign affairs, particularly since my graduate work focused on diplomatic history. However, because one of my core goals is to help students consider their roles as citizens, my survey emphasizes how decisions about foreign policy are made within a democratic society. All teachers of survey courses must make similar sacrifices since it is folly to believe we can cover every aspect of the past. The hope is that when we make decisions on what to cut we make them thoughtfully and carefully.

**Assessing Student Understanding of E Pluribus Unum**

Using *E Pluribus Unum* as a narrative framework is not a panacea that resolves all the challenges of teaching the U.S. history survey. Research suggests that teachers have limited influence on altering students’ preconceived narratives. Professor of sociocultural anthropology James Wertsch demonstrated that many students come to the classroom with an established, celebratory narrative of American history. He asked twenty-four college students to write a short essay on the origins of the United States. He found that twenty-three of the participants organized their narrative around a “quest for freedom” theme and that most students emphasized the agency of European settlers while portraying minorities such as American Indians and African Americans as more passive. (8) While the quest for freedom narrative represents one possible interpretation of the past, its preponderance in the responses suggests that students lack exposure to other stories that might help them grapple with experiences that do not conform to a celebratory

![Figure 3. During the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, a Borden Milk advertisement utilized the concept of E Pluribus Unum to celebrate the Louisiana Purchase for which the fair was named. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.](http://maghis.oxfordjournals.org/)

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story line. More recently, education professor Terri Epstein has shown that racial identity plays a powerful role in shaping adolescents’ willingness to internalize the quest for freedom narrative. She documented that white students are more likely to subscribe to a progressive and positive narrative of the American experience while black students hold a more critical view of the nation’s past. Furthermore, she found that these belief systems remained remarkably static and that “teacher pedagogies tended to amplify rather than alter students’ preinstructional explanations and interpretations.” (9)

Given these limitations, it is important to ask what do students learn from a U.S. history survey structured around the narrative framework of *E Pluribus Unum*? To assess the students’ understanding of this narrative framework at the end of the year, my final exam asks them to write an essay that evaluates the extent to which Americans have successfully expanded democracy, liberty, equality, and opportunity since World War II. They are required to address two specific eras over those seventy years.

Analyzing the fifty-two essays written by students from my two U.S. history sections in 2012 reveals both the possibilities and limitations of using *E Pluribus Unum* as a narrative framework. Student responses confirmed Wertsch’s observation that a “quest for freedom” narrative dominates student understanding of the nation’s past. Forty-five essays argued that American history has followed a positive trajectory that has brought the benefits of the unum to more of the pluribus. Most students presented a linear view of expanding opportunity and liberty, pointing to some positive developments during World War II and the 1950s that eventually culminated in the profound social and political changes of the 1960s. The strength of this narrative probably reflects both the concrete gains that have been achieved in American society since World War II as well as the preponderance of a celebratory story line in our public discourse. Only three essays challenged this story line, arguing that liberty and opportunity have declined over the last half century. One student who presented this counter narrative argued that increases in executive power and an emphasis on national security since the early 1970s have diminished gains achieved earlier in the century.

However, students generally displayed a more nuanced approach to the quest for freedom narrative than the responses described by Wertsch. Only six students wrote that the post–World War II era represented a complete triumph for American ideals. Thirty-nine students developed a more complicated argument, noting that progress has not been universal for everyone. One student’s thesis reflects this typical point of view: “During the 1950s and 1960s, Americans mostly expanded the unum; while a few were denied some freedoms, most received new opportunities and rights in society.” Students mentioned a number of historical and contemporary challenges to American ideals including racial discrimination, xenophobia, gender inequity, and poverty. For instance, in his discussion of the Tuskegee Airmen, one student wrote, “This was a group of African American pilots who fought in WWII. Even though this gave them a new opportunity, it limited their equality because the units were segregated.”

The essays also demonstrated an understanding of how social groups and individuals have sought to influence public policy. A majority of the students discussed the agency of one or more social groups in their essays: thirty-three spoke about African American actions, twenty-two addressed women’s activism, eleven described student protests, four detailed American Indian organizing, three referred to the struggles of religious groups, and three discussed the Latino rights movement.

While many students used the experiences of marginalized social groups to support their arguments, they tended to favor some stories over others. This trend was particularly apparent in the students’ treatment of the African American experience. Professor of education Derrick Aldridge has observed that a simplistic and heroic narrative of the civil rights movement dominates contemporary textbooks. (10) The discussion of African American history in these exams demonstrates the continuing influence of this traditional civil rights narrative. All but three students addressed race in their essays, although sixteen students only referenced government actions such as passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Of the thirty-three students who examined African American activism, most focused on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and nonviolent direct action, particularly the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Only seven mentioned black power organizations, and only eight gave extensive treatment to the actions of average citizens. When discussing the Birmingham campaign, one rare student observed, “Over 900 kids walked to Birmingham and marched with the purpose of going to jail. The next day, 2,500 more teens showed up, but many were blasted with water hoses.” Most students ignored this event and other mass movements, focusing either on government actions, Dr. King, or commonly celebrated individuals such as Rosa Parks. The preponderance of this traditional narrative remained despite my efforts to complicate that story line by teaching about grassroots activism as well as the black power movement.

Despite this and other limitations, the essays revealed that all but four students successfully utilized the schema of *E Pluribus Unum* as a tool to help make meaning of the past. Some students took positions that conformed to a more progressive interpretation of United States history while others identified with a more traditionalist stance. For instance, while several students argued that Roe v. Wade provided greater rights to women, one student claimed that the decision was “not right, it takes away the rights of unborn children.” Unlike my prolife student several years ago who celebrated the Roe decision, this young woman found the space to interpret the past without compromising her beliefs and values. As such, *E Pluribus Unum* has provided a democratic framework for my students to begin their construction of historically sound interpretations of their nation’s past. (Figure 4.)

**Conclusion**

Although assessments like my final exam can hint at what students have learned, we can never really know how the experiences we create...
in our classrooms shape our students’ perceptions of the past or their sense of possibilities for the future. However, if we do not provide them with some sort of narrative framework we run the risk of letting them think that history is just one darn thing after another—a list of facts to be memorized and then discarded. I am not so arrogant to think that *E Pluribus Unum* is the only or best way to frame a U.S. history survey course. In fact, I have had the pleasure of working with a variety of teachers and preservice teachers in my school and community who have created exceptional and diverse narrative frameworks for their classrooms. Hopefully, our students will emerge from our classes with the ability to use these narrative frameworks in their lives. As a history teacher, my greatest desire is that I have provided my students with a foundation that will help them continue to interpret their nation’s past as they act to shape its future. Recently a graduating senior stuck his head in my classroom and said, “Hey Dr. Good, I’ve still got my dollar—*E Pluribus Unum!*” As he left a smile crossed my face. I couldn’t help but think that that was one dollar well spent.

Endnotes

4. Ibid.

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