

TEACHING BEYOND THE TIME LINE

Engaging
Students in
Thematic
History



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Foreword by
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FOREWORD



WHEN I ASK EDUCATORS WHY WE LEARN HISTORY, most responses fall into one of two categories: we study the past to understand the present, and we study the past to make a better future. Most people say both. No one responds that we study the past to recall discrete facts about history in chronological order. So why do so many students continue to experience history instruction as a timeline?

Here is a deep memory. I received a C on a history test in tenth grade. Maybe it was a D, but I'm being kind to my fifteen-year-old self. I remember that the test was multiple choice. And I clearly remember one of the questions I missed: "What year was the Magna Carta issued?" I remember because my teacher, who was generally warm and cheerful, was palpably frustrated with us. I wasn't alone; most of the class had missed that question. He told us the year of the Magna Carta again. He wrote it on the board and instructed us to remember it. I'm sure that at some point in the preceding weeks he'd told us the what, why, and who of the Magna Carta, but the traditional, chronological approach to history instruction had now led to an overemphasis on the *when* of the Magna Carta. It was as if the only thing that mattered was our ability to situate this document in its place on the timeline of history.

A few weeks later, on the next unit test, the question about the year of the Magna Carta appeared again. And once again, I got it wrong. Once again, my teacher was upset. More of the class had gotten the question right on the second attempt, but a good number had still missed it. Our teacher repeated the information once more, we moved on to the next section of the timeline, and the question was repeated again a few weeks later. I don't remember how many times this pattern repeated, but I know for a fact that at the end of grade we were still being asked, and I still didn't know, that the Magna Carta was issued in 1215.

Many students experience history instruction as a set of events from the past to be memorized, in order, so that we can list off the names and dates and get a good grade. Some students do well in these settings, at least as measured by tests like the ones I took. Some students even thrive, their curiosity sparked to dig deeper on their own or as they pursue higher education. But many, like me, flounder. I love history—my organization produces history resources; I've written a history book!—but I did not love history *class*. How could I possibly motivate myself to care about the date of the Magna Carta when I hadn't been asked to remember why the Magna Carta matters to begin with?

Teaching Beyond the Timeline reframes the traditional approach to history instruction by foregrounding theme, purpose, and context over discrete fragments of information. This is not to say that names and dates

don't matter. They do. But what use is a name if you don't know what the person did, how they lived, and their impact? What use is the Magna Carta equals 1215 if you don't know why the document was created and why it still resonates today? Teaching thematically allows students to make meaning and to draw connections between the past, the present, and the future. Teaching thematically transforms history from something to recall to something to explore with curiosity.

Effective history instruction opens space for questions. "What else happened?" "How did different people experience this same era?" "What stories have been told about this event? What stories have been left out? Why?" Teaching thematically prompts students to ask these questions not only of the materials they study in the classroom but also of the materials they encounter outside schools. And yet, as teachers, adopting new approaches to our craft can be daunting. It can be difficult to teach in ways that we, personally, might not have experienced as learners. It's hard to adopt new practices without clear models. *Teaching Beyond the Timeline* provides those models. What I appreciate most about this book is that it is a book *for* teachers, *by* teachers. It doesn't just say, "Hey, we should be connecting historical events to themes!" It offers practical steps, activities, and examples to support teachers through the process of transforming their history curriculum and instruction, from educators who have done it themselves, evaluated the results, and honed their processes. It is empathetic to the realities and challenges of teaching, and it foregrounds students and their needs. *It returns the heart and purpose to the teaching and learning of history.*

Right now, as debates rage around which history should and shouldn't be taught, and why, and how, thematic instruction allows learners to analyze multiple sources, perspectives, and moments in time, and to draw conclusions. Thematic instruction allows students to engage with perspectives that have traditionally appeared in online sidebars, if at all. And, perhaps most importantly, thematic instruction can offer students a sense of belonging and agency that they might not have previously experienced in history class.

I felt wildly unmotivated to learn the year of the Magna Carta. But let's say my teacher had read this book and had introduced the Magna Carta as part of a theme like "Striving for Liberty and Equality." A despot who abused his powers and a people who wanted to do something about it? That would have been familiar to me. And how that resulting document did not confer equal protection to all segments of society? I would have recognized something of myself in that. I would have drawn connections to other moments in time and to my hopes for the future. And yes, I even would have remembered the date. I would have thought, "Wow, 1215 is a long time ago, and it is still relevant today." But I would have learned so much more, and I would have wanted to keep learning.

—Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn, Ed.D.

Deputy Director, Learning and Engagement | Learning for Justice

INTRODUCTION

Why Teach Thematically?

TEACHER: “IN FOURTEEN HUNDRED NINETY-TWO . . .”

Students: “Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

A typical U.S. history course might begin this way, with the teacher calling out a familiar phrase from the students’ elementary education, and the students responding in rote fashion. As the course progresses, the teacher moves through the content chronologically, often starting with the colonial period and ending with the Cold War, centering presidential elections and wars as pivotal events. In early spring, as the class begins its study of the European and Pacific theaters of World War II, one young student in the front row raises their hand to regale the class with their limitless knowledge of WWII battlefield tactics while the rest of the class sits and wonders, “Why do I need to know this?”¹

Before each unit exam, students file through stacks of flashcards with terms like *Louisiana Purchase*, *Emancipation Proclamation*, *the Great Depression*, and *Mutually Assured Destruction* in black marker on the front. History teachers, being the creative, inspiring professionals we are, try to counter this collective ennui by incorporating historical simulations, lively discussions, and provocative debates. These attempts at engagement might temporarily raise the level of student participation, but we are often disheartened to find that our students still struggle to see why the information we are teaching is something they should learn.

We believe a more fundamental shift in the way we teach history needs to occur for our students to be truly engaged and see how U.S. history is relevant to their own lives. A genuine interest in the subject can make students stronger learners—when they engage and see the relevance of events in the past, they think critically about it; their brains are ripe for skill development. Moving from simple rote memorization to requiring students to meaningfully connect historical concepts, people, and events using patterns of comparison, causation, and elements of continuity and change over time is more valuable and useful to them overall. After years of reflection, we abandoned our traditional, chronological approach in favor of teaching history thematically. We organized the course and each unit around central themes designed to capture students’ interest

.....
¹ Note: Throughout this book, we will use the terms they/them/their as gender-neutral singular pronouns.

and ensure our curriculum was inclusive and relevant to all our diverse students, a challenge we found increasingly more difficult to overcome with a chronological approach. We have created this book to help teachers understand why teaching history thematically is beneficial for student learning and to guide you through the process of creating your own thematic history course.

Of course, there are some benefits to teaching history chronologically. Our students learn the arc of U.S. history. Moving from the American Revolution to the Civil War, from the American Industrial Revolution through two world wars, ending with the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War and the era of globalization allows students to easily anchor events in time and place. Students can see the influence of one historical event on another. Progressing through the 1930s and 1940s chronologically, for example, helps students understand how the United States' industrial support of the Allied Powers during World War II pulled the United States from the depths of the Great Depression. Additionally, history textbooks support a chronological approach. We have yet to see a high school-level textbook organized around thematic units. If your school, district, or state has content standards you are required to cover, they are certainly arranged chronologically. Finally, history teachers such as yourselves were likely taught history chronologically. If you are a veteran teacher, you have probably been teaching chronologically your entire career—you have a familiarity and comfort level with this approach and may be nervous to try something new.

Despite these benefits, the traditional chronological approach to teaching history does not always facilitate engagement in the subject matter. History often becomes a string of dates, events, and names that students are required to memorize without much understanding of why they need to know that material or how it may be relevant to their lives today. Most events are given a cursory examination because the teacher feels the need to keep moving through the content to get through the course of study or content standards, leaving little time for the students to dive into topics of interest and explore pieces of history that they connect with. This lack of engagement can make it difficult for a teacher to help students develop skills of critical thinking, reading comprehension, and argumentative writing because the students simply do not have a connection to the material.

Additionally, a chronological approach does not foster a culturally relevant and inclusive classroom. Our students have witnessed a cultural reckoning. Social media, streaming documentaries, TV shows, podcasts, books, and news outlets are creating a greater awareness of the experiences of a much more diverse community. Yet in most history textbooks, the lives, experiences, and contributions of women, people of color, and

members of the LGBTQIA+ community are given relatively little coverage, relegating them to the last few pages in each chapter or pulling them out of the dominant narrative entirely, with snippets of their experiences briefly described in separate blue or yellow boxes in the textbook margins. Textbooks tend to center the experiences of those with formal political power over grassroots activists throughout history, emphasizing the individual contributions of the former and generalizing the latter. But our students are diverse in culture, language, gender, ancestry, and economic background. They want, and deserve, to see themselves reflected in the history they are learning. They want to learn about those who have been left out of history textbooks, uncovering contributions of people like them. Even when current events are brought into the classroom, they are often given short shrift as teachers race through hundreds of years of historical content. Rarely are students able to make connections between past and present events in a chronological history class, resulting in a general lack of awareness of how *their* lives have been impacted by history.

Teaching history thematically, however, can be a much more engaging way to structure a course. When teachers are no longer confined by chronology, the study of history becomes less about memorizing seemingly random dates and events and more about tracing particular ideas and movements across periods of time. Rather than a brief mention of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in the midst of the WWI unit, leaving students to think women's suffrage just happened out of the blue, students can trace the roots of the suffrage movement from Abigail Adams' letters to her husband, John, during the revolutionary era, through the Seneca Falls Convention, the disputes over who had the right to vote after the Civil War, the picketing and hunger strikes in the early 1900s, to the eventual ratification of the amendment in 1920. Imagine how much more interested students will be when they have a fuller understanding of historical concepts and do not feel like they are just terms they need to memorize for a test. There remains a sense of chronological order here, only more selective and in accordance with a unifying theme. The relevance of this focus on women's suffrage can readily be engaged through current events as well. Have students consider efforts at voter suppression or the continued fight for economic equality today and how these efforts tie into the movement of women and their allies across the country's history. In addition, this deeper dive into the content also allows students more opportunities to practice the historical thinking skills we value in our courses: understanding contextualization, recognizing the cause-and-effect relationship between events, and identifying continuity and change over time. Students can think much more critically about the events we teach when they have a broader understanding of their place in history.

We instruct our students at a unique point in their lives, when they are exploring their own political values and beliefs and developing as civic-minded, passionate young adults. They are paying close attention to major world and U.S. events that are unfolding before them. They want to know *why* things are the way they are and *how* we got here. Teaching thematically facilitates the connection between past and present events as it gives teachers the flexibility to start in the modern era. Themes can be built around current events, making the present day the foundation for the course where students dive into the past to uncover how we got here, creating a much more relevant experience for our students. They can see how history impacts their world today, giving them a much greater appreciation for the study of history.

Additionally, a thematic approach is much more conducive to creating an inclusive classroom for all students. Rather than following the dominant narrative in the textbook, teachers can create themes that allow students to see themselves represented in the curriculum. If you have been teaching for some time, you have probably heard your students ask questions like: “How come we only learned about immigrants from European countries?” or “Weren’t Native Americans enslaved also?” or “What happened to the people living in the territories the United States colonized?” Essentially, the “Why haven’t we been taught about [fill in the blank]?” question is one that most history teachers wrangle with, especially if they stick closely to the textbook. The fill-in-the-blank piece usually refers to traditionally marginalized voices that have been left out of the classroom. A thematic approach allows the teacher to center the class around these voices, providing mirrors for students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and windows through which students can learn about people with backgrounds different from their own.

“The identified theme or concept serves as a lens to identify, analyze, redefine, test, and reassemble the relevant events to develop theories that will make it easier to understand new events.”

JACK ZEVIN, professor of Social Studies
Education at Queens College, 2000

HISTORICAL THEMES DEEPEN STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

Engagement and relevance facilitate learning. Recent findings support the idea that teaching history thematically helps students understand the significance of the material they are learning. Rather than focusing on rote memorization, teachers can present content organized around a bigger thematic picture that can build complex connections or schema for deeper student understanding. It is important to have a solid foundation of historical knowledge, but the thematic approach is not contrary to that goal. In fact, providing a main idea in the form of a theme increases students’ ability for recalling knowledge, developing questioning skills, and understanding causal relationships (Peters, Schuback, and Hopkins 1995). ●

Not only does a thematic approach benefit students, it also makes our job as a teacher much more enjoyable. Teachers can create themes that draw upon their own interests, as well as their students' interests: art, economics, social justice, literature, sports. Bringing our own passions into the classroom keeps us engaged and helps bring history to life for our students. Students know when teachers are excited about what they teach, and that excitement is contagious. If we love what we are teaching, our students will be all in, ready to uncover the past with us.

How to Use This Book

In this book, we will take you along our journey as two educators who recognized that the traditional, chronological approach to teaching history was not the best way to serve our students. In response to this realization, we began to research models of how to teach history thematically to create a classroom that was more engaging, relevant, and inclusive than the way we were taught and the way we had been teaching for years. However, we quickly discovered a dearth of materials in explaining how to structure a thematic course. In a recent study of social studies teachers using social media to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches, the most frequently cited disadvantage of teaching thematically was a lack of knowledge on how to structure this type of course. Teachers had difficulty “determining the content, themes, the order of themes, appropriate teaching methods and materials to use with this approach” (Turan 2020, 211). As we developed our own thematic course, we encountered these same challenges and had to build from the ground up with a lot of planning, research, and of course, trial and error. This book aims to provide the structure that you need to overcome these difficulties in setting up a thematic history course. We will trace through our efforts and share our decisions on organizing course content, the themes we selected, and the methods and materials we utilized.

As we experimented with this approach, we discovered firsthand some of the real benefits to a thematic course. We found that teaching history through themes more easily allowed us to bring the modern era into the classroom, helping our students finally understand why the study of history is such a vital part of their education. It also enabled us to examine the past from the lens of traditionally marginalized voices, incorporating stories that have been omitted from most textbooks. Immediately we saw student engagement increase, resulting in higher performances on academic assessments than we had seen in the past. Our students became curious learners, asking insightful questions and diving into their own research on topics we were discussing in class. Because of the success we

were seeing in our own classrooms, we wanted to share our approach with teachers who may be new to teaching history and not sure where to begin or veteran teachers, looking to change things up in their classroom as they are finding what they've done in the past may not be working as well with today's students. Our book is designed to guide you through a step-by-step process of creating your own thematic history course.

This book is meant to be both informational and a workbook, and it is intended for both busy precredentialed and veteran teachers. We want this workbook to be practical and to offer ideas for different comfort levels with change as you may want to make more moderate shifts or add a few elements of your own. We will present the full array of changes we implemented, how we did it, and why, but we will also offer some modifications so you can gradually transition to a thematic approach, or enhance it even more so if it is already under way. To get the most out of the book, you should have a pen in hand to reflect, jot down ideas, and begin your instructional design. We have structured the book as follows:

First, we will take you through the fundamentals of thematic teaching from the building blocks of a thematic course to avoiding pitfalls along the way. Chapter 1 will walk you through the essential ingredients you need to start creating your thematic course. We will provide you with a general structure of the thematic approach and discuss essential elements that will make your course engaging and relevant, including identifying your personal motivation, engaging students through current events, centering identity and inclusion, and using an inquiry-based approach.

After addressing the fundamentals, we will move into the design process. Here you will apply all the essential components you read about in Chapter 1. This is where you will get to build your thematic course through a series of carefully designed activities. You will start with creating your course and unit themes in Chapter 2 and developing big-picture questions that you and your students will revisit throughout the year. This chapter is about establishing the foundation for your course.

Chapter 3 will dive into designing your units. In this chapter we will examine how to begin each unit with a current event and how to incorporate chronology into a thematic unit. You will build a unit from one of your themes and big-picture questions, while integrating requisite content or state standards. We provide several templates for brainstorming the essential standards and mapping your thematic unit.

Of course, well-designed lessons are essential to any successful classroom. Chapter 4 gets into the practical details of daily lesson planning, including use of engaging primary and secondary source documents and ensuring your students are developing the essential skills needed to be good historians. We provide two sample lesson plans, one that focuses on a broad period of time (in Chapter 5) and one that addresses a narrower

time period (in Chapter 6). We discuss the merits of each and provide you space to develop thematic lessons of your own.

In Chapter 7, we will discuss diverse ways to assess student understanding in a thematic course, including written unit exams, project-based evaluations, and culminating end-of-year assessments.

Additionally, we have included throughout the various chapters ways to troubleshoot potential hurdles that may arise when switching to a thematic approach, such as ways to incorporate required standards, address students' understanding of chronology, navigate community expectations, and modify existing lessons to transition to a thematic approach more easily. We have a few words of advice on how to turn these obstacles into opportunities for a more engaging and inclusive curriculum.

Finally, in the appendices and online resources, we have included copies of the planning tools you will encounter throughout the book to continue designing your thematic course, as well as examples of our thematic unit maps, lessons, and lesson plans that we reference. They are yours to use, modify, or share with your colleagues! By the time you are finished with this book, the plan for your thematic class will be well underway.



OUTLINING INGREDIENTS FOR A THEMATIC COURSE

BEFORE EMBARKING ON THE DESIGN PROCESS, it is important to have a solid understanding of what it means to teach history thematically.

We will demonstrate how thematic teaching can help you use these tools altogether in more powerful ways, so your students develop a deeper understanding of history and see its significance in their own lives.

The Thematic Concept

Whether you are a new teacher or have been teaching for many years, you are certainly familiar with a chronological approach to U.S. history. The teacher begins the course with a particular date and event early in history, such as Columbus' arrival in the New World in 1492, the establishment of the Jamestown colony in 1607, or the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The teacher then moves in order throughout history, hitting all the "major" events—American Revolution, Civil War and Reconstruction, the American Industrial Revolution, Spanish-American War, World War I, Great Depression and New Deal, World War II, and Cold War—up to the contemporary era. Figure 1.1 shows how this timeline approach might be structured over a school year. Each unit heading highlights the various major events in succinct periods of time, progressing from the past through the present.

In This Chapter, You Will:

- Learn the difference between a chronological and thematic approach
- Identify your personal motivation for developing a thematic course
- Come to understand the essential ingredients for a thematic course, including:
 - ✱ Engaging through current events
 - ✱ Centering identity and inclusion
 - ✱ Using an inquiry-based approach

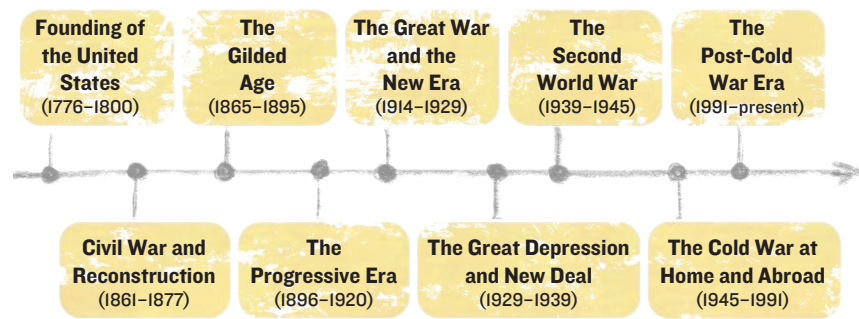


FIGURE 1.1 U.S. History Timeline with Chronological Units

This approach is easy to follow, simple to teach, and supported by your textbook's structure, but the march through history may leave teachers and students feeling like the goal is to simply “cover” U.S. history. A chronological approach does not provide students with many opportunities to make connections across time or really see beyond the dominant narrative to how history has impacted and been shaped by traditionally marginalized groups. A thematic history course, however, gives teachers the freedom to reorient historical time to create greater engagement and relevance for students. It structures units around central themes or ideas instead of specific periods of time. Each thematic unit would follow a chronological timeline, but the focus of the unit would be on the central *idea*, rather than the select period. In contrast to the timeline shown in Figure 1.1, a thematic course could be visualized as demonstrated in Figure 1.2.

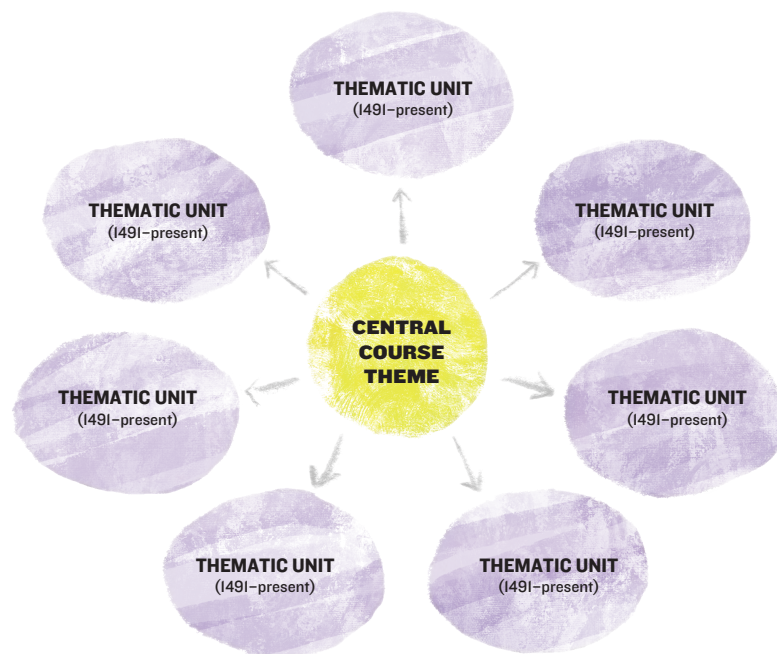


FIGURE 1.2 Template: U.S. History Timeline with Thematic Units

As you can see in Figure 1.2, there is a central course theme in the center with thematic units revolving around the central theme. In Chapter 2 we discuss in more detail the purpose and development process of central course and unit themes. But for now, consider the central theme as the foundation of your thematic course. It will frame the historical narrative you will provide your students with, tying all the curriculum together. Every thematic unit connects to the central theme, examining a particular aspect of that theme over time. If you think of your central theme as the hub of a wheel for your thematic class, the unit themes are the spokes, strengthening and supporting that central hub. Unlike the chronological approach, unit themes cycle through the historical timeline, examining different elements of U.S. history through a focused lens. This thematic approach gives students the opportunity to trace ideas in U.S. history over time, allowing students to understand how and why historical developments continued and changed over time and how those developments underpin what is happening in our present day.

This book will provide you with many examples of potential central course and unit themes you might use to design your thematic course, and you will have the flexibility to develop your own themes. But first, to help you further visualize what a thematic course could look like, see ours for an example (Figure 1.3).

Our central course theme, “Striving for Liberty and Equality,” serves as the foundation for our entire course with each unit theme revolving around that central idea. Each thematic unit of our course spans the entirety of U.S. history, but because each unit is focused on a particular theme, students develop a much more solid understanding of that theme



FIGURE 1.3 U.S. History Timeline with Thematic Units

as they dive into it over a period of several weeks. For example, in the “Immigration and Migration” unit, students examine the broad history of internal as well as external movement of people from the founding of Jamestown through the present day. Throughout the unit, there are many opportunities for exploring the theme: students could identify patterns of migration, recognize similarities and differences in the experiences of various immigrant groups across time, and understand how centuries of immigration policy impacts immigrants in the United States today. Furthermore, this thematic approach allows students to revisit events multiple times over the school year, but through a different lens. Although some believe that repetition can be a drawback of teaching thematically, we have found that it helps reinforce students’ understanding of the significance of an event or development. Students learn about World War II not only in the unit on U.S. foreign policy, but by studying the experiences of Black people, Native Americans, and women during the war and by exploring the impact the war had on the U.S. economy. By examining certain events in different lights, students will gain a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies and complexities of U.S. history than they would in a traditional chronological course that moves through the material in a more superficial way. Since each unit covers a broad timeline of U.S. history, the order in which you teach each unit is flexible; you can order them in a way that you think will be the most engaging and relevant to your students.

We hope this brief explanation of the structure of the thematic approach helps you visualize what a thematic class could look like. In the following chapters, we will go into much more detail on how to develop your own thematic course, including creating course and unit themes and designing lesson plans that support the thematic approach.

Essential Ingredients for a Thematic Course

Now that we have laid out the basic structure of a thematic course, let’s look at what we have identified as essential elements to make that course both engaging and relevant to your students. Identifying your personal motivation, capturing students’ interest with current events, centering identity and inclusion, and using an inquiry-based approach are all essential components for an engaging and relevant thematic history course. Although these ingredients may be utilized in a chronological course, they become fundamental with a thematic approach. These ingredients are baked into the thematic course, rather than served as mere add-ons or supplements.

Identifying Your Motivation

The first step on the journey of creating a thematic history course is to consider your motivations. Although we have laid out many of the benefits of teaching thematically, we think it is important that you take some time to identify why *you* want to create a thematic course. What advantages do you see for you and your students by teaching history through themes? What are some of the drawbacks to teaching chronologically? How did your experience as a student of history shape the way you teach, or want to teach, your students? How can your own interests help create a class that is engaging and relevant for your students? Identifying your personal motivation—what we call our “personal why”—will help you develop a rationale for the tough decisions you need to make on how to structure your course in ways that are best for you and for your students. It will also help you navigate some of the challenges you might face in developing and teaching your thematic course.

When we began creating our thematic course, we spent a lot of time in the planning stages discussing why we wanted to make the transition. Those discussions helped us determine the focus of our thematic course, particularly what we wanted our course and unit themes to be. As obstacles came up throughout the first year of teaching the course, we came back to our personal motivation to remind ourselves why teaching thematically was so important to us and why we believed it was in the best interest of our students. Although we genuinely believe that a thematic history course is beneficial for all students, creating and implementing one can be difficult. So we thought it would be helpful to share our personal why with you and give you an opportunity to reflect on why you want to teach thematically.

Lisa's Personal Why

Born in San Francisco, California, and raised by my maternal grandparents and divorced father, I am the first in my family to graduate from college. As a teenager, I was inspired by my eleventh-grade U.S. history teacher, who taught history through the experiences of ordinary people. He told the class his account of what it had been like to be a Black man in the Jim Crow South and in the San Francisco Bay Area, and he challenged his students to understand the complexities of the Vietnam War by bringing in a disabled veteran to share his story. I will always remember how this teacher brought the lesser known stories of America's history to life in the classroom. Often using the textbook as a foil, Mr. Glen encouraged students to interview family members and to make the past directly meaningful to our personal and family experiences. After interviewing my father, I learned about my family's Pennsylvania Dutch roots in the

Midwest and role in the early twentieth-century oil industry. After talking to my grandparents about their experiences during the Second World War, I learned how the wartime mobilization led my grandma to become a working mother and lifelong union member. These assignments from my U.S. history teacher helped me connect the history we were learning with my own families' experiences.

In college, I pursued courses in Native American history, women's history, and the modern Civil Rights era to find out more about subjects that were often overlooked in my early education. These courses set me on a path to pursue a major in history and then to become a teacher myself. As a new teacher, I was inspired by James W. Loewen's work, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, to recognize and work around the dominant narrative in history textbooks and curriculum. Hired by the Acalanes Union High School District to teach U.S. history to eleventh-grade students at Campolindo High School in Moraga, California, I have continued to read history for pleasure and to improve my understanding of the complexities of America's history. As I began pursuing my master's degree in American history through the Pace-Gilder Lehrman Institute's program, I found access to inclusive resources to effectively bring college-level work into a thematic high school course. Working with like-minded souls in the district, I have collaborated with others on ways to make the U.S. history curriculum accessible to more students and to include diverse voices throughout the course.

China's Personal Why

Just like many of the students we teach, I did not grow up loving the study of history. In fact, history was my least favorite subject in school. The dates, the names, the events—they had no connection to me. I memorized the facts to do well on the tests, but as soon as the exam ended, all the historical information left my brain. It was not until my second semester of college, in an introductory U.S. history course, that I found my life's passion. My professor seamlessly integrated the contributions of women throughout history as part of the course. When discussing the American Revolution, the professor discussed women being the force behind the boycotts. When we moved into the antebellum period, the professor told us of the efforts of female abolitionists like Sojourner Truth and the Grimké sisters alongside Frederick Douglass. It hit me like a ton of bricks. *This* was why I had no interest in history before—I had not been able to see myself in it. With the inclusion of women, I had role models, roots, and relevance. I immediately switched my major from biology to history. As I delved further into the study of history, I found answers to other questions about my identity. As the daughter of a Mexican/Navajo father and a white mother who rarely spoke about their racial backgrounds, I was left in the dark about my ancestry. I wondered, where did my last (maiden)

name “Green” come from? How is my dad Mexican if all his family is from Colorado? Why did my great-grandmother refuse to identify as Mexican, demanding she was Navajo, when everyone else in the family willingly calls themselves Mexican? Only through studying the history that was *not* in the textbook did the answers to these questions start to reveal themselves. The puzzle pieces of my identity began to take shape.

After completing my degree, I began teaching high school with the goal of creating a class in which all students could see themselves. The chronological approach to history through which I was taught in high school followed a white, male-dominated narrative—a narrative that barely even acknowledged the existence of people like me. Rather, I would uplift historically marginalized voices and show my students that they and their ancestors were just as significant as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. But year after year, state standards, antiquated textbooks, and district-approved courses of study got in my way, and I continued to fall woefully short of my goal. Finally, at a racial equity conference in New Orleans, I realized that to create the type of history course I honestly believed in, I had to scrap everything I had done and build the course from the ground up. After discussing with colleagues, my coauthor, Lisa Herzig, and I decided a thematic approach would lend itself to creating the engaging, relevant, and inclusive history course we hoped to instruct our students. Teaching thematically would give us more flexibility to ensure our students’ diverse backgrounds were represented in our course and that we could connect the historical content to the present day, two important aspects of teaching history that are so difficult to achieve in a chronological course. We wanted our students actively engaged so they could practice the investigative and analytical skills of historians and see how our nation’s history directly impacts them today.

Your Own Personal Why

Every one of our personal motivations influenced the course we developed. But this book is meant for *you*. In Figure 1.4, write down your personal why for wanting to develop a thematic course. As you reflect and write, consider these questions: What advantages do you see for you and your students by teaching thematically? What are some of the drawbacks to teaching history chronologically? How did your experience as a student of history shape the way you teach, or want to teach, your students? How can your own interests help create a class that is engaging and relevant for your students? If you are struggling to identify your personal why at this point, feel free to continue reading and working through the activities in this book. Your motivation might be clarified as you learn more about how a thematic course could benefit your students. Or if you are ready, take a few minutes to write down your personal why now.

[illegible]

8 Teaching Beyond the Timeline

Engaging Through Current Events

One of the greatest benefits of teaching history thematically is that it facilitates students' ability to make connections to current events, which engages students' interest and helps them see how history is relevant to their own lives. History teachers often tell their students they need to understand history to understand the present. But rarely do history classes make meaningful connections between the past and the present. We all have the best of intentions to help our students see the links between the historical events we discuss in our class and the present day.

But with an ever-growing curriculum, that goal becomes less attainable as each year passes. On the other hand, our course must be relevant to our students for them to fully dive into the learning process. Engaging students through current events allows them to see what they are learning in your class is significant to their own lives.

Many history teachers do include current events as part of their class. Often, students are given an assignment where they must research and present a current issue. These can be very meaningful assignments, but often they have little or no connection to the historical content of that unit. Consider a change in the way current events are included in a history class. What if a particular current event was the *foundation* for the unit, and the historical content you chose to teach in that unit was meant to support students' understanding of the current event? For example, consider a potential thematic unit on who has had access to the democratic process throughout U.S. history. The unit could begin with a look at present-day voting laws. In the spring of 2021, the state of Georgia passed a law that many argued would result in widespread disenfranchisement of people of color. And it is not just Georgia. Since 2011, nearly every state in the country introduced a bill that would place more stringent regulations on who could vote (Brennan Center for Justice 2021). If you want your students to understand voting rights in the United States today, a topic they might be particularly interested in as soon-to-be voters, your unit might include an examination of advancements in voting rights such as the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. They could contrast these advancements with limitations some groups faced on their access to the franchise resulting from poll taxes, literacy tests, terrorism at the voting booths, and the 2013 Supreme Court decision of *Shelby County v. Holder*. Many of these topics would certainly be included in a typical U.S. history course. But imagine how engaged students will be if you *start* the unit with a topic that is relevant to them, then have them engage in inquiry to uncover the past behind these voting laws.

"I understood why what we were learning about matters. It seems like a very simple reason that I discovered, but it was the first time I learned that history is not just so we know a bunch of stories, but so that we can know the context behind current events and issues, to get to the root of problems, and find out well-researched solutions. By having us relate back to the present, it answered questions about modern-day issues that I just assumed did not have answers."

Sandra | student

A FEW RESOURCES FOR USING CURRENT EVENTS

- Brown University's Choices Program, "Teaching with the News: Free Lessons Connect Your Classroom to Headlines in the News" (n.d.)
- Facing History & Ourselves, "Current Events in the Classroom" (n.d.)
- Larry Ferlazzo's "Seven Ways to Bring Current Events into the Classroom," Education Week (2020)
- AllSides

To make those connections clear, the teacher must be very intentional with the current events they choose to present and tie the events to the curriculum they are teaching. The sheer number of news outlets and potential current events to frame a unit can be overwhelming and make it difficult to decide which events to include as part of a bigger unit. To help facilitate this, we extensively use the "Teaching with the News" section of Brown University's Choices Program curriculum and the "Current Events in the Classroom" section of the Facing History & Ourselves website. Both sources regularly publish timely and relevant lessons that will help you bridge the gap between the historical content and present-day developments. They regularly highlight ideas about civic engagement, race, and gender, which can encourage thoughtful dialogue and engage students emotionally and ethically.

THEMATIC TEACHING IN ACTION: Engaging Through Current Events

Here is an example of incorporating a current event at the start of a unit to engage student interest and curiosity (see Figures 1.5 and 1.6). In our unit on imperialism, we began by analyzing the current debate over Puerto Rican statehood. After evaluating arguments for and against statehood, students used a virtual whiteboard to share their relative knowledge and perspective on the issue. We included sample student posts on the whiteboard and the lesson highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of statehood for Puerto Rico. Once students were engaged in the present-day issue, they were much more invested in learning the historical background related to how the United States acquired the island, and more broadly U.S. imperialism and the Spanish-American War.

PUERTO RICO STATEHOOD: Pros and Cons

Directions: Read the short article “Will Statehood Benefit Puerto Rico?” Evaluate the pros and cons of this issue. As you read, list the important advantages and disadvantages to statehood in your own words.

Advantages:

- + There would be programs that would help Puerto Rico's economy, such as Medicaid, tax credits, and many more federal programs
- + Will have a stronger economic position; will increase tourism, entrepreneurship, and investment in business in Puerto Rico
- + Full representation in U.S. legislature and ability to vote on laws that affect the island; ability to vote on presidents

Disadvantages:

- Loses place in Olympics and Miss Universe; issue is independence of political status
- Could potentially lose multilingual tradition
- Tax structure may change



FIGURE I.5 Student Lesson: Puerto Rico Statehood (continues)

Discussion Board: Respond to the following in a few complete sentences: **Would statehood benefit the Puerto Rican people? Explain why or why not.**

FIGURE I.5 (continued) Student Lesson: Puerto Rico Statehood

FIGURE I.6 Student Responses to Question on Puerto Rican Statehood



Centering Identity and Inclusion

To engage students in the learning process and make history relevant to their lived experiences, it is important to not only engage with current events but to center race and gender identity in your thematic course. The United States is a diverse country, and the study of its history should reflect this fact. History classes that focus on one narrative and that omit diverse perspectives not only are incomplete, but also often leave students feeling excluded and disconnected from the subject matter. Since the late 1960s and modern Civil Rights Movement, historians have researched more inclusive history and shifted away from writing “great men history.” New subfields of history have emerged, such as women’s history, Black history, and labor history, to examine the experiences of everyday people in the United States.

This scholarship affords teachers a vast array of resources to create a more accurate and inclusive telling of the nation’s story. Now educators have access to many primary and secondary sources that present history from the viewpoint of diverse racial and gender identities. Even though these resources are readily available, the inclusion of diverse perspectives often does not take center stage in a traditional, chronologically ordered course. Part of the reason stems from the way teachers were taught history themselves, typically through the dominant narrative and in chronological order. Another culprit can be the ways history textbooks are structured, as most of these texts present history chronologically. If they include marginalized groups, they do so in a short paragraph—in a sidebar or at the end of the chapter—or as an illustration or graphic in one corner of the page. Although you could still incorporate diverse viewpoints in a chronological course, the thematic approach allows you to center these perspectives, bringing them out of the footnotes of history and into the full spotlight. Like those of European ancestry, the role of Black Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Latino/a/x, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community are not incidental side stories; they are an integral part of the country’s history and help make the United States what it is and what it has been. Thematically teaching U.S. history necessitates a cutting of the cord to the textbook’s layout, an increased reliance on primary and secondary sources, and a true centering of race and gender to present a more accurate and inclusive story.

Many states are also recognizing the importance of teaching an inclusive history curriculum. In 2011, California legislators signed Senate Bill 48, known as the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act (FAIR Education Act), into law (California Code 2011). The FAIR Act

“[This] class was the first history course in which I felt historically included. Thus, I believe that the element of centering identity and inclusion is crucial. It is unarguable that unique ethnicities and races in the United States experienced history differently, therefore, why not include those different perspectives?”

Eric | student

compels that textbooks and curricula include the accomplishments of persons with disabilities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. As of March 2021, five states in total (California, Colorado, Oregon, New Jersey, and Illinois) require schools to teach LGBT history (Aspegren 2021). As states increasingly move in this direction, thematic teaching provides an innovative solution of how to center identity and inclusion and still meet the course standards.

Although there is emphasis on creating inclusive courses, opportunities to bring in diverse racial and gender groups' experiences are limited in a traditional framework. Typically, textbook publishers will structure their books to mirror the chronological structure of the state standards and offer a paragraph or brief reference to major events involving women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as the Nineteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Stonewall Riots, where members of the New York gay community protested police brutality. Textbooks present these events as examples of widespread forms of protest of eras, but they rarely make meaningful connections across time. Often, textbooks depict the Stonewall Riots as both the beginning and the culmination of LGBTQIA+ protests for greater political and legal rights. It is easy for students to walk away from the material believing this movement sprang from nowhere in particular! Students may not see the connections between this moment in 1969 and continued efforts to press for freedom and equality. Therefore, for students to better understand the patterns of continuity and change over time, restructuring the course to emphasize themes and allow students opportunities to examine primary and secondary source information can help teachers address these movements for equality in more relevant ways.

Because thematic teaching constructs units around central ideas rather than specific periods of time, it centers various aspects of people's identity more organically, resulting in a more engaging and relevant class for your students. As you determine which thematic units to include in your history courses (as you will do in Chapter 2), keep in mind the various aspects of identity, including race, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. As we built our course, we centered many of our units around identity. You may choose that model or find ways to weave identity and inclusion in any thematic unit. Whichever model you adopt, it is important to acknowledge that issues of race and gender have been subordinated in the discussion or only briefly mentioned in textbooks and state standards. Thematic teaching provides an opportunity to bring these concepts to center stage. It can help engage students in more meaningful ways as they connect events of the past to more recent ones and see themselves in that history.



THEMATIC TEACHING IN ACTION: Centering Identity and Inclusion

A unit on the industrial revolution does not seem to offer much on race and gender identity. You could teach the unit and avoid these concepts entirely by beginning with the causes of heavy industrialization following the American Civil War; the impact it had on living and working conditions, machine politics, and industrial leaders in the late nineteenth century; and the efforts of those trying to counteract these changes. This is a typical chronological approach. But if you created thematic units centering identity and inclusion, you might approach the Gilded Age in a way that is more relevant to your diverse student population. Although immigration from southern and eastern Europe is often included in the traditional approach to the industrial revolution, a thematic unit on immigration and migration could more readily incorporate diverse immigrant and migrant groups and could provide a more honest and inclusive account of this period. Examining Asian immigrants, who were also drawn to industrialized and urban areas of the United States, or the movement of Black migrants out of the Deep South and into Northern and Midwestern city centers would explore this period in greater depth and represent a more complete history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Students could explore the reactions of native-born American citizens to these newcomers from within and without the United States leading to passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the national origins immigration quotas of the early 1920s, and increasing racial tensions. Furthermore, students could investigate the importance of groups like the Chinese in constructing the transcontinental railroad, the role of European immigrants in helping the United States emerge as a leading industrial power by 1900, and the efforts to create interracial alliances among organized labor and agrarian groups.

To further examine this period through a different lens, a thematic unit on women could investigate how the turn-of-the-century industrialization helped some women achieve financial independence from men, allowing them to cohabitate with other women in what were termed “Boston marriages,” demonstrating a dramatic shift of gender norms. The same unit could look at the Supreme Court case *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), which limited the female workday to ten hours and established a precedent of protective laws for women based on inherent differences between the sexes. Although it is still important to examine the causes and effects of industrialization, the focus shifts from the role of elite political and business leaders and onto average people: how they changed and were changed by the forces of the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With units that consider aspects of one’s

identity, teaching the Gilded Age moves from the traditional focus on captains of industry to how industrialization affected people, people like our students. Maintaining the rigor of the course content but making it more directly relevant to students is the goal in approaching this unit with race and gender at its center.

CENTERING IDENTITY AND INCLUSION WITH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

In centering identity and inclusion in our classrooms, we based our approach on the tenets of culturally responsive teaching and learning. We have relied on the research of experts like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Zaretta Hammond to inform our work. Their collective insight provided us with the foundational knowledge to transform our classrooms into ones that meet the diverse needs of our students.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), a pioneer in the field, identifies three criteria on which culturally responsive pedagogy relies. The first criterion is academic success; teachers must evaluate and respond to students' academic needs to build their skills. She notes that the most successful culturally responsive classrooms were ones where teachers demanded, and students chose, academic excellence. The second criterion is that a student's cultural competence be maintained. Students' various cultural backgrounds should be brought into the classroom and used as building blocks for learning, not seen as something to "undo" in a student, as often happens in traditional classrooms. Finally, Ladson-Billings argues that a culturally responsive classroom instills a "critical consciousness" in students, empowering them to critique institutions, customs, and values that allow social inequities to persist.

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Geneva Gay (2018) argues that traditional measures of student achievement expose systemic issues within educational institutions. Gay argues that culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to see cultural differences as assets, not hindrances. Bridges must be built between students' homes and the classroom. Ethnic and cultural diversity need to be integral to the content that is taught, whether the subject is social studies, math, English, science, music, or art. A strong class community and student-teacher relationships are vital to a culturally responsive classroom. Like Ladson-Billings, Gay believes students must feel empowered to challenge, critique, and change the status quo when it is not responsive to their diverse needs.

Zaretta Hammond (2015) examines the connection between brain-based learning and culturally responsive pedagogy, two concepts that until recently have been addressed only separately. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and*

Linguistically Diverse Students, Hammond explains what happens to the brain when it feels threatened, how it records memories of past experiences, and how it uses those memories to seek rewarding outcomes or avoid perceived threats in the future. If a student does not feel physically or emotionally safe in a classroom, their brain responds accordingly, going into “fight, flight, or freeze” mode. The brain cannot act in its fullest capacity, physically growing, so one can engage in more complex thinking and learning. As such, Hammond identifies four practice areas of culturally responsive teaching: awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community building. Culturally responsive teachers develop a sociopolitical awareness, recognizing the privileges and inequities one experiences based on race, gender, class, or language. They establish authentic connections with students, understand how culture impacts the brain’s ability to process information and use that information to strengthen a student’s intellectual capacity, and integrate cultural practices and curriculum into the classroom to create a socially and intellectually safe space for students. Hammond argues that culturally responsive teaching is one of our most powerful tools to close the achievement gap.

These scholars encourage teachers to expect academic success, to establish connections between home and school, to embrace cultural differences, and to create safe classroom environments. Centering identity and inclusion in our thematic units is one way to effectively create a classroom that better meets our students’ diverse needs. ●

Using an Inquiry-Based Approach

In addition to using current events and centering identity, another way to help engage students with the content and connect the dots thematically is to use an inquiry-based approach, often by utilizing “big-picture” or “essential” questions. These are open-ended questions that can be posed to students at the start of a unit. They are intended to challenge students to think critically about the material in that unit rather than to simply test a student on their ability to recall the information. These questions encourage students to develop the skills of historians, asking them to make connections across time or geographic location or between distinct groups of people. Carefully crafted questions can help students make connections between the historical content they are studying and their own lives.

Although some traditional classes may use this inquiry-based approach to get at meaningful takeaways from a particular period of history, units centered around chronological periods of time are

“I’ve never seen history be taught this way, and yet this was by far the best history class I’ve taken. Having learned U.S. history chronologically previously . . . a thematic structure allowed for me to see connections between history and the present day, and come to conclusions independent of a textbook or teacher.”

Makena | student

quite limited in their scope, making it difficult for students to understand the broader implications of the concepts discussed in a unit. By structuring units around more comprehensive themes, however, students could really practice historical thinking skills of identifying causation and continuity and change over time, including an understanding of how the concepts presented in the unit are relevant in the modern day. For instance, while examining the Great Depression and New Deal, teachers in a chronological course may emphasize historical developments and processes within the period 1929 through 1939. However, the thematic teacher could situate the Great Depression and New Deal policies in a broader context of U.S. economic history. A thematic unit could help students understand the critical causes and outcomes through various periods of economic turmoil, including those from the present day.

**THEMATIC TEACHING IN ACTION:
Using an Inquiry-Based Approach**

Let’s contrast traditional big-picture questions in a chronologically formatted course with potential questions in a thematic course. In a chronological course, the inquiry-based questions may remain focused on the late 1920s and 1930s. Students may be prompted to think critically and examine historical patterns, but the questions posed may remain tied to a very discrete period. See Figure 1.7 for some sample inquiry-based questions one might use in a traditional course.

BIG-PICTURE QUESTIONS: Chronological	
How and why did the Federal Reserve, Congress, and the presidential administrations of Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt respond to the Great Depression?	How and why did the role of the federal government in the economy and U.S. society expand because of the New Deal?

FIGURE 1.7 Big-Picture Questions: Chronological

As these questions are based on a unit that only spans a decade, the familiar terrain of causes, course, and consequences are presented in very matter-of-fact ways. Students’ responses to these questions will be extremely limited in their scope, and students may not be able to make

connections between this period and those that came before or after. Certainly, students may point to the differences between the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations' efforts and the ways the New Deal took unprecedented steps to alleviate the misery of the Great Depression. However, we want to tap into broader patterns of continuity and change, and we also want to center race and gender in the discussion. In a thematic unit on economic justice, for example, students can trace the causes and consequences of financial policy throughout U.S. history, including its impact on women and people of color. Students could also examine the debates over the government's proper role in response to periods of unemployment, its attempts at redistributing wealth, and its evolving responsibility to ensure economic growth. This approach transcends the history of 1930s policies, so students can examine these patterns and debates now, making the lessons from the past more applicable to their lives. For students to make those connections, we offer two examples of what inquiry-based questions in a thematic course might look like (see Figure 1.8).

BIG-PICTURE QUESTIONS: Thematic	
How and why did the federal government's role in economic disasters change between the late nineteenth century through the contemporary era?	How and why did economic recessions occur over time, and in what ways were women and people of color disproportionately impacted by these periods of high unemployment and economic fluctuations?

FIGURE 1.8 Big-Picture Questions: Thematic

In response to these two big-picture questions, we want students to understand the ways that industrialization created widespread wage and income gaps, particularly for incoming immigrant laborers. Students will also see the impact of unemployment and market fluctuations on women, such as the period after the Second World War and during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the unemployment rates for women, particularly women of color, rose at disproportionate rates. Students could also compare the philosophies of the two major political parties regarding the proper role of the government in the economy during the turbulence of the late nineteenth century, the Great Depression, the 2008 recession, and the COVID-19-created economic crisis of 2020. These debates persisted even as the public grew more dependent on government assistance

during times of high unemployment. The thematic approach, rather than a chronological one, can help facilitate students' understanding of these broader patterns across time. A longer view of U.S. financial history needs to be explored, beyond the era of the Great Depression—although this event would be a central part of a unit on economic policy. Approaching the content creatively with a central thematic concept at the heart of the organizational scheme can help teachers construct more effective, inquiry-based questions that tap into students' curiosity and engage them by bridging the past with the present.

Chapter in Review

Let's take a moment to review.
In this chapter, we:

- Defined the differences between the chronological and thematic approaches to structuring a history course
- Gave our own personal whys and provided some space for you to reflect upon your motivations for crafting a thematic course
- Unpacked the foundational elements of thematic teaching that could make your history class more relevant and captivating for students by:
 - ✧ Engaging through current events
 - ✧ Centering race and gender identities
 - ✧ Utilizing an inquiry-based approach