

12th History McCarthy
Pre-Interview

Interviewer: Why did you choose to teach this lesson?

Teacher: We're talking about the lesson on Friday? Okay. One of the things that the AP program for US History says we have to cover is the decision in the United States as to how to address communism, especially the threat or the possibility of communism at home in the United States. A famous element of this is McCarthyism, and the witch hunts. The lesson is going to be about that, and then a broader sort of more modern connection, the idea of sticking up for people who are falsely accused.

Interviewer: What are the learning outcomes for the lesson and how are they related to the larger sequence?

Teacher: I guess specifically, to understand the idea of McCarthyism, to understand the push back against McCarthy, the inclusion that came from that. In a broader sense, it helps them understand the seriousness of the Cold War and how big of an effect the fear had on American's at the time. Bigger than that, they need to understand the outcomes of World War II, set up a new dynamic, and then we're going to be doing- the following week, we're going to be talking about the Cuban missile crisis, which is sort of the climax of the Cold War. They need to understand the seriousness of that, and how threatened people felt, so they can understand how important the human missile crisis was, and why it was such a crisis. In a way, it's an outcome of our study of World War II, but then it also builds up towards what's coming later on.

Interviewer: How would you describe the lesson as meaningful, useful, or relevant to students?

Teacher: They're going to do a reading ahead of time, their homework beforehand, which is about McCarthy. They have to study who he was, and what he did, and HUAC, and the witch hunts, and the Hollywood Ten. Look at some background knowledge of it. Then another reading, they're going to do sort of the historical side, and then the other part of it is they're going to be studying, they're going to look at the kind of rhetoric that Trump and Cruise are putting out right now. We've talked a lot about Trump in class, because he's kind of an exciting character to discuss. Sort of the idea of blanket blaming other people for your problems, or accusing without any evidence.

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I'm sort of openly liberal in my discussions in class. I tell them that. To understand a little more in depth of why, not just that I think he sounds ridiculous, but why it is that he makes me scared. Connecting that to the historical past, because we're repeating in a way McCarthyism from the past is coming back in sort of a modified form here. I want them to understand what that's like, and why it's scary. To know that we've seen this before, this is not a brand new phenomenon. In that way, it's relevant.

We're going to bring in, at the end of the- there's an interactive activity, then afterwards there's going to be a poem. The kids who are into the language and so on, there's going

to be a poem in there. The literature type students. We're going to have a video afterwards, historical video from the time period. The kids who are into that. I'm going to try and bring in some different elements to it, sort of drive home the point.

Interviewer: What are some of the big questions that you're using to drive student discussion?

Teacher: What questions do I ask? At the end of the first activity, there's going to be a series of questions as to how did you decide who was going to be in your group? How did you decide who to suspect? Why would you choose to accuse somebody? What did it feel like to be accused? Trying to put them into the mindset of the people who lived through the late '40s, early '50s. Through that sort of a few years where McCarthy was really strong in his accusations, to understand a little bit why people would actually go out and do the things that they did.

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That'll be an element there. Later on, it's going to be more of a review back to what we've done previously. The difference between capitalism and communism, why American's believe so strongly that capitalism was better. But also to drive home the point that the whole Cold War was a fight between ideas, rather than a fight over territory, or a religious fight, or something like that. It was really a fight between ideas about the best way to run a country.

Interviewer: How are you planning to check for student understanding or assess student outcomes?

Teacher: Probably badly. I don't have a like before you walk out the door kind of thing, or a quiz in that way. I will do things later on to go back and review, and that sort of check for understanding, but with this particular class, they're almost all seniors, they're some of the top kids in school. I really drive for a couple of weeks and then I'll go back and do a pause and go back and check and make sure there's some understanding. I know that that's probably not the best way to do it. I should probably be checking more as we go, but in this particular case, the activities I think are so worth while in class that I dedicate the class time to the activity rather than doing the little check in as you go kind of activities.

Interviewer: Will you be doing little formative checks maybe?

Teacher: I'll be watching. I'll be watching and I'll be asking them questions to see what sort of things they're talking about. I ask them questions to try and illicit things that they've read about, or that they did for their homework. Usually in the activity that we're doing, at least one person no one will take them in their group. They'll get blacklisted. I'll ask, "What was the name for this? Do you know what it was?" Or, "Can you think of somebody who was in that position?" They'll start calling out stuff, but it's not like, "Everyone take out a little half sheet of paper, and let's do a mini quiz." I'm not going to do that with this class. My tenth grade class, yes. Every day. Not this particular group of students.

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Interviewer: How would you describe the lesson as engaging for students?

Teacher: I think I talked some about that, but engaging in the sense like they're active, they're involved, they're going to be making a lot of choices about it. Then there's the pause and reflect back, so they're going to connect some of the historical stuff to it. When we do the poem, I draw cards. I have kids read. I stop periodically, I draw more cards and ask them questions. I use the cards in class, I think that's a really important tool, because then they can't check out. They always know, "At any moment I might get called on," and they don't want to look dumb in front of their friends, so they pay attention.

I know like people do Popsicle sticks, or whatever the trick is, but it's a great trick. Generally keeps most people engaged. I've never had a kid fall asleep during this lesson for all the years that I've done it. I'm not worried about that.

Interviewer: Is there anything about the emotional investment you think, you mentioned about feeling what it was like to perhaps be in these circles, or be called out, or be suspected. Do you think that drives [inaudible 00:07:43]?

Teacher: I guess, I think you can look at it from two ways. It's investment emotionally for them, because as 17 year olds they are very interested in belongingness, in having friends, in being part of a group. The activity is interesting because when they have to form groups, and most of the kids have a little card that says, "Green," and some will have a red card. They want to be with only greens, but they can't show the card to anyone else.

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The first thing they'll do is they'll all go get with their friends, because they naturally trust each other. Then they'll start to mistrust each other. If they don't, I go around and start planting some thoughts in their head to make sure that the activity worked. Suddenly, the regular social order starts to fall apart. It's really interesting to watch them suddenly become very suspicious of each other. All of those feelings of like, "My friends don't like me," or, "I better hurry up and accuse somebody else because my friends will suspect me otherwise."

We become very, I'm trying to think of the name of the book right now where the kids get stuck on the island. Lord of the Flies. They become very Lord of the Flies. It's exactly what happens, they become very tribal and territorial. "Please love me and take me in your group." They have a strong emotional investment just because it's a human thing that comes out of it. Afterwards, when we discuss it, they really can understand the feelings of people back then, because they just experienced those feelings.

For me, it's an emotional investment. The lesson is really important to me because the kids in this particular class are going to become community leaders some day. They're going to be business owners, and they're going to be, just by nature of who they are as these AP students, they're going to be leaders someday. I really feel scared that some day in the future we may have leaders out there who are not able to recognize the demagogues and the McCarthy type people. I have a strong interest in having the lesson be a success in that way. There's a few lessons that I do during the year that I tend to

[00:10:00] get emotional, and this sometimes is one of those, depends on how it goes.

Interviewer: How do you plan to manage student behavior throughout the lesson, starting with expectation?

Teacher: The activity sets up with, it's based on a Power Point that goes through the rules. It emphasizes the rules a couple times, the procedures. This class, I've never really had any behavior issues with this group. It's just not that group of kids. But I do lay out the expectations of how the activity is going to go, and there's sort of a time set for it. I think sort of laying out the ground rules usually helps with any particular class. No difference here. They know what the expectations are, they know what they're going to do. They have a goal in mind. I give extra credit for the winning team, so they are motivated in that way. Behavior wise it's not an issue. Every once in a while if it's going too much, I'll blink the lights to get their attention. I don't like to yell too much, although sometimes I forget and I do that anyway. Generally I'm not worried about having a problem with this class.