

Teachers Respond to Teaching “Greek Myths”

Social studies teachers were asked to respond to the following questions. Answers have been edited.

1. What are your reactions to the ideas expressed in the essay? Be as detailed as possible.
2. How do you teach about the ancient Mediterranean world in your classroom?

Ken Kaufman, Brooklyn School for Global Studies, Brooklyn, NY

As a high school student in 1974, I was taught about the classic beauty of Greek art, that Socrates was the world’s first philosopher, that Athens invented democracy, and that “Western Civilization” was born in Ancient Greece. I do not remember learning about developments in the “Stone Age” or “Bronze Age” or of contributions from other early civilizations. But that is not how I teach today. The curriculum guide issued by the New York City High School Division has students in ninth grade Global History classes explore prehistoric people, the development of agriculture and metallurgy, and all of the great river valley civilizations. There is still a disparity between the course and our textbooks, however that will change as they are replaced. I agree with many of the issues raised in this article, but I feel they are being addressed in New York City.

Nicole Theo, Islip Middle School, Islip, NY

In my classes, I present ancient Greek civilization, especially Athens, as truly different from other early societies. While citizenship was limited, the ability of citizens to participate in governance is a major development in human history. The founders of the United States were Europeans who traced their cultural and intellectual ancestry back through Rome to Greece. It was their starting point when they approved the Declaration of Independence and created the Constitution. Does world history start with ancient Greece? Of course not. Does ancient Greece have a special role in the history of western civilization and the United States? Definitely.

Stephanie Morris, Hempstead, NY

The “we” in the statement, “Are We Teaching Greek Myths?”, must be identified. It refers to people teaching from a Eurocentric worldview based on lies, misconceptions and propaganda. This essay is commendable because it questions standards and traditions in education and curriculum that have been accepted for hundreds of years in American education. It reveals systemic racism and a cultural trail of deceit embedded within the standard curriculum. Young teachers, especially, but more seasoned teachers as well, must be fortified “to fight the power” that has hidden the truth about history. This essay is a start.

Dean Bacigalupo, Lincoln Orens School, Island Park, NY

In my experience, there is an over reliance on the text as an instructional tool. For example, the text informs us that after the fall of Rome learning stopped and Europe fell into the “Dark Ages.” Any teacher with a critical mind can challenge this statement by using Gothic architecture, mosaics, narrative poetry (*The Canterbury Tales*), passion plays, or philosophical meditations (Thomas Aquinas, Maimondes) as evidence. Most do not; so students continue to view Europe during the Middle Ages as a savage and lost world awaiting a Renaissance so culture could be reborn.

When I teach Global History, I have students read primary source documents comparing life in Athens and Sparta. At the end of the study, students debate whether equality, liberty, and freedom exist in each polis. According to the text, Athens was free and Sparta was not. But the authors of the text never considered how women or slaves in these societies felt about their social positions. My students did. Curiously, the New York State Regents exam shared the biases of the textbook. When my students refused to identify Athens as a free society, they were marked wrong. A critical approach to learning can empower students. A change in assessment is needed if we are going to empower teachers.

Robert Storch, former chair, West Hempstead MS/HS, West Hempstead, NY

I applaud this effort to present a conceptualized and inquiry-based approach to the teaching of social studies that stimulates historical debate. It continues to be disheartening to me that “critical examination,” student engagement and “exploration of essential historical questions” remain a minor part of the curricular repertoire. My

experiences as a public high school teacher along with my college instruction strongly support my position that the negative attitudes of students toward the Social Studies, as well as their lack of appreciation for its significance, are in large part due to lecture-based presentations which relegate the learner to a passive role as bystander. This certainly does not serve the goals of social studies education to develop intelligent citizens and life-long learners ready and willing to confront and deliberate the critical issues with which we are faced.

Michelle Maniscalco, Syosset High School, Syosset, New York

It is not a surprise that Europeans claim total credit for “Western Civilization,” nor is it a surprise that other cultures want recognition as well. We all interpret history from our own perspective. It would be unfair to dismiss the contributions that Greece did make to Western Civilization, just as it is unjust to ignore the contributions of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Social studies curricula overflow with content and requirements. I constantly struggle with what to include, exclude or glaze over. I am forced to pick, choose and minimize various historical eras. I readily admit that I simplify and exclude certain historical events. I also confess that my biases influence what I choose to teach. Part of the problem is the way New York State has organized the ninth and tenth grade curricula. In its desire to be less Eurocentric, the course was renamed Global History. However, the organizing theme remains the history of the West and all over societies are measured against it.

At the end of the tenth grade curriculum I rip through countries and regions at a rapid rate in an attempt to prepare students for assessment tests. My goal becomes completing the curriculum not giving students the opportunity to study, think and compare. We must find ways to make social studies more than a forum for lectures and facts. If our students do not learn to think critically about the past and present, then we fail them as teachers. Thinking critically does not merely include analyzing documents, but also the circumstances, the author and the audience. All of this must be included in the curriculum and it will require time.

