

## **Can More Be Less? The Depth-Breadth Dilemma in Teaching American History**

Bruce VanSledright examines an issue central to the history classroom: depth vs. breadth. The sheer number of historical events is overwhelming to students and teachers alike and VanSledright states that “Choices must be made about what to foreground and background, and these choices are not easy” (40). This study consisted of two American history eighth grade classrooms in Maryland. Instructional methodology differed in each classroom, however, each teacher had eighteen years of teaching experience.

Both classes were studying the development of the thirteen original colonies. VanSledright contrasted Kerwin’s (pseudonym) chronologically-based linear approach to colonial development with Jansen’s (pseudonym) emphasis on colonial self-rule. VanSledright maintains that “ These two teachers’ approaches to enacting the curriculum epitomize the different views of structuring history for the classroom rooted in differing conceptions of how to provide coverage with depth” (38).

Kerwin’s program consisted of thirty-eight classes over an eight- week period. Two-thirds of the unit’s material centered on Virginia, the remaining third on New England. She relied heavily on the textbook, study guides and occasional lecture. She presented a substantial amount of detailed information. In contrast, Jansen “ operated from a dual frame of reference” (40) and used the text primarily as a resource as he covered the social, economic and political development of the thirteen colonies while emphasizing the role of regionalism and sectional differences. His unit consisted of twenty class periods. Interestingly, interviews revealed that Kerwin was teaching outside her disciplinary concentration (geography) while Jansen had majored in American history.

VanSledright concludes that while depth in historical study is a desirable goal, these case studies prove that there may be more than one way to attain it. He cautions that each approach has its “trade-offs”.

*VanSledright, Bruce A. “Can More Be Less? The Depth-Breadth Dilemma in Teaching American History.” Social Education 61.1 (1997): 38-41.*