

Lesson Plan: Teaching American History Through Heather Cox Richardson

Course: Grow Your Own Educator Preparation Program

Grade Level: 9-12 (Future Educators)

Duration: 35-40 minutes

Instructor: Brian Edwards (brian.edwards@wacoisd.org)

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain Richardson's "story first" approach to teaching history
2. Demonstrate how to connect historical events to current issues
3. Describe strategies for being approachable while maintaining expertise

Standards Alignment

Texas TEKS (Education and Training Career Cluster):

- 130.122(c)(4)(A): Demonstrate techniques for development of effective relationships with students that foster mutual respect
- 130.122(c)(5)(B): Identify methods for enhancing student learning through relevant connections
- 130.122(c)(7)(A): Describe and implement effective learning environments that engage students

Connection to Educator Preparation:

- Develops skills in making content relevant and accessible
- Models discussion-based teaching approaches
- Emphasizes trusting students as capable thinkers

Materials Needed

- ■ Presentation slides (slides.yaml) - displayed via projector
- ■ Reading passage (reading.md) - displayed for students
- ■ Group discussion worksheet (worksheet.md) - on student devices
- ■ Paper and pencils for note-taking
- ■ Google Classroom quiz (from quiz.md)

Lesson Sequence

Opening (5 minutes)

0:00 - 0:05

- Ask: "When you studied history in school, did it feel relevant to your life? Why or why not?"
- Introduce Heather Cox Richardson: professor, historian, 2.6 million newsletter subscribers
- Frame: "Today we'll learn how she makes history feel alive—and how you can too."

Direct Instruction (10 minutes)

0:05 - 0:15

- Present slides covering:
 - Who Richardson is and her "Letters from an American"
 - Her core belief: trust people with facts
 - The "story first" method vs. starting with abstractions
 - Connecting past to present
- Read aloud the reading passage while students follow along
- Pause for comprehension check: "What does 'history rhymes' mean?"

Guided Practice - Group Discussion (15 minutes)

0:15 - 0:30

- Organize students into groups of 3-4
- Direct students to worksheet on devices
- Circulate among groups to:
 - Ask follow-up questions: "Can you give a specific example?"
 - Model Richardson's approach: share facts, let them draw conclusions
 - Encourage quieter students to participate
- At 0:28, give 2-minute warning

Closure (5 minutes)

0:30 - 0:35

- Invite 2-3 groups to share insights
- Key takeaways:
 - Start with the story, then the pattern
 - Connect history to what's happening now
 - Trust students—give facts, not conclusions
 - Be approachable, not intimidating
- Transition to quiz

Assessment (5-8 minutes)

0:35 - 0:40

- Students complete quiz on Google Classroom

- Remind: questions randomized, no retakes

Differentiation Strategies

For students needing additional support:

- Pair with supportive peer during discussion
- Provide sentence starters: "One way to connect this to today is..."
- Focus on Prompts 1 and 4 (most concrete)

For advanced students:

- Challenge: "How would Richardson's approach work for a subject besides history?"
- Assign facilitator role in group discussion
- Encourage deeper exploration of the "rhyming" concept

Assessment

Formative Assessment:

- Observation during group discussions
- Quality of historical-to-present connections students generate
- Participation in whole-class sharing

Summative Assessment:

- Google Classroom quiz (8 questions)
- Focus on understanding Richardson's approach, not biographical facts

Reflection (Post-Lesson)

To be completed after teaching:

What worked well:

What needs adjustment:

Student engagement observations:

Notes for next time:

Appendix

Key Vocabulary:

- **Harkness method:** Discussion-based teaching where students sit around a table and all participate
- **Historical thinking:** Analyzing the past to understand patterns and connections

- **Primary sources:** Original documents or artifacts from a historical period

About Heather Cox Richardson:

Heather Cox Richardson (born 1962) is an American historian and professor at Boston College. She earned her PhD from Harvard, studying under David Herbert Donald. Her newsletter "Letters from an American" places daily news in historical context and reaches over 2.6 million subscribers. She specializes in the American Civil War, Reconstruction, the American West, and political history.

Additional Resources:

- Letters from an American (Substack newsletter)
- "How the South Won the Civil War" (2020 book)
- "Democracy Awakening" (2023 book)