“If you can’t engage a student in the classroom, how can you expect them to be engaged as a citizen?”
‘History Has Its Eyes’ on Alumnus Named National History Teacher of the Year

JOE WELCH’S INNOVATIVE CLASSROOM APPROACH ATTRACTS NATIONAL ATTENTION

By Emily E. Stock, A’17

Years before King George III told the colonists “You’ll Be Back” in the Broadway megahit Hamilton, Pittsburgh middle school students were writing and producing their own songs about the United States breaking away from England.

The project was the brainchild of Joe Welch, E’07, an eighth grade American history teacher at North Hills Middle School.

“It’s exciting being involved in projects where my students lose track of time because they enjoy it so much,” Welch says.

Last year, his novel approach in the classroom was recognized nationally, when he became the youngest educator to win the National History Teacher of the Year Award, presented by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

“I was literally shaking when I got the call from Gilder Lehrman,” Welch recalls.

The annual award, which includes a $10,000 prize and the opportunity to meet esteemed historians and explore Gilder Lehrman’s extensive archives, is presented to a history educator who effectively utilizes innovation and creativity in the classroom.

“I thought about all of my teachers who have inspired me over the years,” he says.

One of his first teachers was his grandmother, a World War II Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps veteran. When she moved in with his family, his interest in history sparked.

“It was impactful for me because I could connect personal stories from my grandma with a major historical event,” Welch says. “I use this approach with my students to go beyond a list of facts and help make personal connections with historical figures and events.”

Welch credits his teaching approach to the comprehensive education he received at Duquesne. Due to completing several college credits in high school, Welch had more room in his undergraduate schedule to experiment with different classes. He recalls the support of Dr. David Carbonara, associate professor in the School of Education’s Department of Instructional Technology, who allowed Welch to take graduate classes as an undergraduate student.

“My professors at Duquesne gave me the flexibility to explore other subjects and become better-rounded as an educator and a person,” Welch says. “Dr. Carbonara really encouraged me to take risks and do something different with technology in the classroom.”

Instead of trying to compete with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) for funding and recognition, Welch integrates technology in his teaching to make history education more engaging and relevant to his students.

Welch engages his students with a myriad of creative multimedia projects, including creating virtual reality museums about the first five United States presidents and producing stop-motion videos with 3-D printed Jamestown artifacts. To him, any personal connection students can make with the people, places and objects of history is valuable.

He wants his students to realize that social studies holds value in modern society.

“Learning calculus is important, but many students will likely not use it in a future career,” Welch says. “However, everyone will be able to vote at age 18 and will need social studies to be an informed citizen. If you can’t engage a student in the classroom, how can you expect them to be engaged as a citizen?”

While Hamilton may not be completely historically accurate, Welch says it serves a greater purpose in getting the general public interested in history through creativity and first-person storytelling.

“It’s important for students to realize these are actual people. Human emotion is a constant, no matter if it’s the 18th century or 21st century,” Welch says. “Because yes, this person lived 200-something years ago, but they are people just like you and me who lived, had successes and failures, and had feelings and emotions.”

And when it comes to creativity in the classroom, Welch says Alexander Hamilton has taught him a great deal about hard work, perseverance and collaboration.

“My colleagues and I are always bouncing ideas off of each other and thinking of new ways to incorporate new technology,” Welch says. “My students never know what I’m going to do next.”

Visit duq.edu/magazine to see how Joe Welch implements creativity and technology in the classroom.