

The Importance of Trivia

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For all of us who teach history the important elements are to make the subject interesting, informative, and hopefully, enjoyable. Many of the students arrive in our course with a negative feeling about history because of past experiences in memorizing dates that had no meaning and in hearing about people and events in an uninteresting way. Consequently, it is up to us to “turn them on” to the excitement and drama of history. And, we have one big factor going for us even before we start—we teach history of sport. Today even the most unsporting and casual learners cannot escape the realm of our topic. They are bombarded in magazines, newspapers, and on TV with sport stories. All we have to do is to capitalize on their fragmented knowledge of the present by making the past come alive.

One teaching technique relies upon the novelty of trivia which gives the students an association with the facts they learn. The essence of trivia is using a question as a springboard to recall details about an event. Trivia can be a trigger device that makes the association of historic facts blend together. A question alone may seem obscure, but when expanded it can lead into many elaborations. To illustrate this point, consider the following question: Why did the AAHPER hold its annual convention in a foreign country one year? The answer, that when the Canadian R. Tait McKenzie was president it seemed fitting to have the convention in Montreal, may appear as an insignificant fact. This small fact can, however, be expanded to other topics, such as the life of McKenzie, the structure and officers of AAHPER, and the relationship of Canadians and their universities to AAHPER.

Another example is a question about the outcome of the recent football game between Clemson and Ohio State. Most people probably do not remember the score, but they know Clemson won, and everybody remembers what Woody did in that game. This incident may not seem like trivia now in 1979, but in 1989 it could be considered as such. The important element was the bowl game, but an incident occurred that could be examined to demonstrate several issues: the passion of a coach to win, the blinking of an eye by a university on past indiscretions that resulted in an immediate firing, the sad ending of a colorful career, and the pressure of intercollegiate athletics.

As in any teaching technique, trivia cannot be over-used. It should be interspersed with other methods employed in the course. A single fact or trivia alone may appear insignificant, but when it is related to other information, it assumes significant knowledge. The students seem to find it fun, and it adds some lightness and entertainment to the presentation of material about people and events.