

# Engaging Students in Learning History through **Pop Culture**

Findings from a National Study  
with History & Social Studies Teachers

## Engaging Students in Learning History through Pop Culture Findings from a National Teacher Feedback Study

*“Poptential™ really drives home the connection between history and what is happening now. It helps my students tie together what we are learning and what they are doing outside of class. The short clips from so many popular movies and documentaries give just enough to grab my students’ attention without overwhelming them with more screen time. You do a great job of providing EXACTLY what I have always wanted.”*

High school teacher – Wisconsin  
Teaches American History, Economics and Government  
16+ years of teaching experience

### **Introduction**

Student engagement is the Holy Grail in education. Across all grade levels and content areas, teachers strive every day to find new ways to engage their students in learning. The reason for this holy quest is simple: years of educational research point to a positive connection between students’ engagement with educational content and higher student achievement outcomes. The reason it is so difficult is harder to explain. According to recent research from Project Tomorrow®, only about 50% of middle and high school students say they are actually engaged in what they are learning in school most of the time. Both students and teachers point to many reasons for this seemingly lack of active interest in schoolwork. Students talk about the lack of relevancy or connection to a real-world context as a barrier to engaging them in the learning process. Teachers worry that it is hard for them to compete with the types of highly entertaining and engaging content that students can access from the palm of their hand via a mobile device. But new learning modalities have the potential to disrupt this stalemate. The increasing access to digital content and tools in the classroom is opening up new opportunities for teachers to not only successfully engage their students in course content, but also to design interactive learning experiences that bring the real world directly into their classroom. Even into a History, Economics or Government classroom.

The use of pop culture references and content within instruction is one of the ways that is gaining traction as an effective way to both engage students in educational content and to help them make connections between academics and the real world. To better understand the value of this new learning modality, Project Tomorrow and Certell partnered on a recent study to explore the views of History and Social Studies teachers nationwide about their use of pop culture in their classroom. This report documents the authentic findings from 500 teachers including almost 100 who were already using the pop culture videos within the Poptential curriculum from Certell. While the report documents many new insights about the role of pop culture in supporting student learning, five key findings are most noteworthy:

1. 96% of History and Social Studies teachers say the use of pop culture references and content is a valuable way to engage students in learning today; 56% identify it as very valuable.
2. 84% of teachers say that the use of pop culture videos is a very effective way to stimulate class discussions.
3. Almost three-quarters of teachers (72%) say that using the Poptential curriculum engages their students in learning.

4. 9 in 10 teachers who are using the Poptential curriculum report that they are a more effective teacher because of their access to the Certell curriculum.
5. Across all course content areas, more than 92% of teachers said they are likely to recommend Poptential to another teacher.

It is our goal that the findings from this study, including the thoughtful insights of the teachers we polled and interviewed, will stimulate new discussions around ways to engage our students in purposeful learning. We hope that those new conversations may lead to your own discovery of new “holy grail” solutions that will work within your History and Social Studies classes as well, whether that is a video clip from a Jerry Seinfeld show to teach economics or a song from the play Hamilton to understand the motivations for the American Revolution.

### **About the Certell Teacher Feedback Study**

The goal of the Certell Teacher Feedback Study was to understand the authentic views of History and Social Studies teachers and their students about how they are using digital and online resources to support learning and the value proposition of Certell’s Poptential resources on student engagement and knowledge acquisition. Additionally, the study was interested in examining student and teacher views on the merits of pop culture videos and references within the learning process. To address these goals, Project Tomorrow designed a two-phase study process which included an online survey to collect feedback from teachers and students, and a series of focus groups and interviews with teachers. The survey tool consisted of a mix of multiple-choice questions, Likert scale items and narrative response questions. The focus groups were semi-structured around a key set of questions about the teachers’ experiences particularly using the Poptential resources. The data collection efforts took place in May and June 2021. In total, 500 History and Social Studies teachers and 107 middle and high school students submitted an online survey as part of this study. Nine teachers participated in the focus group series.

Key defining characteristics of the sampling of 500 teachers who responded to the survey include:

- The breakdown of the teaching assignments by content area
  - American History (65% of the respondents)
  - Government (44%)
  - World History (38%)
  - Economics (34%)
  - Personal Finance (19%)
- Respondents represent a highly experienced teaching cohort with 59% of the respondents reporting that they had 16 or more years of teaching experience
- 62% of the respondents have a Master’s degree in education or another field
- Gender breakdown was 62% female and 36% male
- Respondents represented schools in 49 different states
- 94 of the teachers were currently using the Poptential resources within their History and/or Social Studies classes

Key defining characteristics of the sampling of 107 students who responded to the survey include:

- Students were recruited by their teachers to complete the survey
- 66% were in an American History class during the 2020-21 school year; 27% were in a Government class
- 98% of the students reported using the Certell e-book as part of their learning process

The key findings shared in this report are the result of a comprehensive analysis of the feedback shared by the 500 teachers and their students. Data analysis focused on the views and perspectives of both teachers who were currently using the Poptential resources as well as teachers who were not users. The quantitative data is reported using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data collected through the narrative response questions and the focus groups was coded for trending themes and similarities/differences in responses and are shared as descriptive statistics where appropriate. As applicable, the data findings were disaggregated by teachers' content area assignment or usage/non-usage of the Poptential resources. Comparative data from Project Tomorrow's Speak Up Research Project<sup>1</sup> is included as needed to provide additional contextualization of the findings.

## **The Teacher Feedback Study Findings**

### ***Setting the Context: Views of History and Social Studies Teachers Nationwide***

Teachers' access to and use of online and digital content, curriculum and resources within instruction has been increasing steadily over the past few years. Project Tomorrow's Speak Up Research Project annually documents changes in teachers' comfort and confidence in using these tools as well as the frequency of their usage. For example, in 2016 only 31% of History and Social Studies nationwide reported using an online curriculum on a regular basis within their courses. **Currently, 59% of History and Social Studies teachers say they use an online curriculum with their students weekly, an increase of 90% in just five years.** Increased access to devices such as tablets, laptops and Chromebook for student use in class has helped to facilitate the use of online and digital content within learning as well. As a result of the sudden shift to remote learning in many communities in 2020, 77% of classroom teachers now report that their students are provided with a school-owned device to use in school and at home for extended learning.

With the increased usage of both devices and online content, teachers' views on the value of digital learning experiences have evolved as well. A majority of teachers (53%) now say that the effective use of online or digital resources can help personalize the learning process for their students and result in more interactive and participating in-class experiences. School principals report that technology has the potential to be an effective tool for engaging students in learning (64% agree) and prepare students for future college or workplace expectations (49%). But educators universally agree that the key to effective usage of online tools within learning starts with the quality of those digital resources. Unfortunately, 51% of school principals say it is difficult to evaluate the quality of online curriculum or digital content.

Similarly, the History and Social Studies teachers in the study sampling report challenges as well with finding digital content, curriculum or resources to use in their classrooms. According to 53% of the 500 teachers

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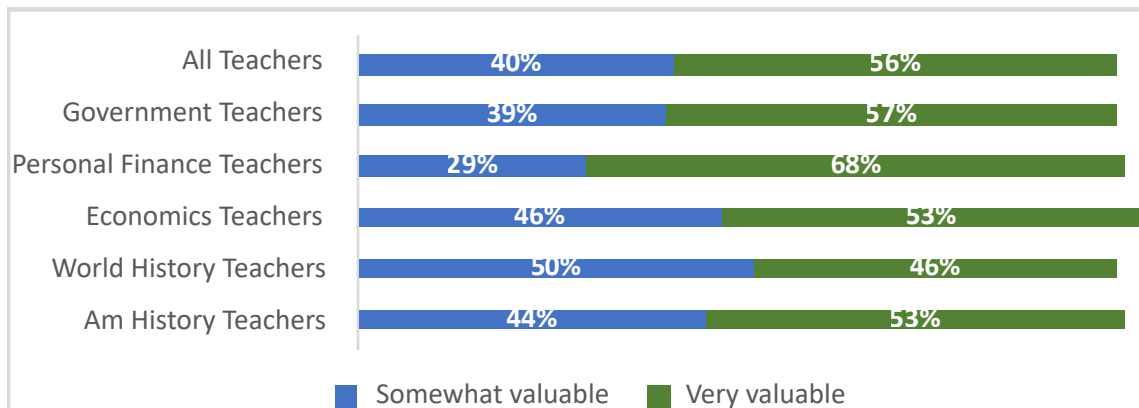
<sup>1</sup> The Speak Up Research Project is an annual, large-scale data collection and reporting effort facilitated by Project Tomorrow nationally to understand the impact of new learning models and interventions in K-12 education.



nationwide, they have trouble finding content that meets the varying ability levels in their class and 31% report they cannot find content that matches their curriculum standards. Over one-third of the teachers in the sampling (38%) say there are simply too many products or resources to evaluate or choose from. However, teachers across all grade levels and content areas do agree that they want digital content that will engage their students in learning, provide a real-world context for that learning experience, and is relatable to their students, especially given the digital-savviness of today's youth.

A hallmark of Certell's Poptential online curriculum for history and social studies courses is the inclusion of pop culture media and engaging digital storytelling. As part of this study, our national sampling of 500 History and Social Studies teachers were asked to comment on the hypothetical value of using pop culture within their instructional practice. Overwhelmingly, the teachers endorse the idea of leveraging pop culture, such as through relatable videos to engage students in learning. Combining the percentages of teachers who said it would be *somewhat valuable* with those that indicated it would be *very valuable*, **96% of teachers say that they consider the use of pop culture references and content as a valuable way to engage students in learning today; 56% identifying it as very valuable.** This high endorsement is not mitigated by the content or course assignment of the teacher as illustrated in Chart A. For example, 53% of Economics teachers as well as American History teachers say the inclusion of pop culture references is *very valuable* for engaging students.

**Chart A: How valuable is the use of pop culture references and content in engaging students in learning?**



Teachers in the national sampling were asked to explain why pop culture references and content are valuable within their courses. Our analysis of their narrative feedback identified three re-occurring themes in the teachers' responses. Teachers' examples of their usage of pop culture are provided for additional context.

- 1. Pop culture references create a personal connection between the content and the student. This helps the student relate more deeply with the content.**

*"It provides a relatable connection to kids. Music, fashion, hobbies, etc. are things that kids can relate to. By bringing pop culture into the lessons, it makes kids relate and know this is not ancient history. Yes, cultural references and videos are always successful connectors for kids."*

High school teacher – New Hampshire  
Teaches American History and Government  
16+ years of teaching experience

*“Providing students a way to relate to the content through pop culture is key and this is something I do when possible. I would love to have a more ready resource available for this type of content.”*

High school teacher – North Carolina  
Teaches American History and World History  
1-3 years of teaching experience

*“I use it to make connections to content that I know students will not be engaged with. It facilitates their understanding when they can relate to it.”*

High school teacher – Texas  
Teaches American History  
4-10 years of teaching experience

**2. Pop culture references engage students in the learning process by drawing them in with fun or entertaining content.**

*“If students don't engage with the material, they won't learn. Pop culture connects the course with their lives and draws them in to learning.”*

High school teacher – Wisconsin  
Teaches Economics and Government  
4-10 years of teaching experience

*“Making connections in the news, drawing them in with morning questions. Yes I would love more, because it makes it fun and keeps them engaged. Gets them to start looking for them on their platforms like TikTok and SnapChat.”*

High school teacher – California  
Teaches American History, Economics, Government and Personal Finance  
11-15 years of teaching experience

*“Whenever I can use pop culture or appropriate YouTube videos, I do. For example, during a unit on Ancient Egypt, students were exposed to Steve Martin's "King Tut" dance/song and Mr. Nicky's song on Ancient Egypt. I would use these more often if more were available. Students love them and it helps them relate to history. More, more, more, please!”*

High School Teacher – Washington  
Teaches American History, World History and Government  
16+ years of teaching experience

**3. Pop culture references provide a real-world context that adds relevancy to current events and resonates with students and aligns with the digital tools they are using every day in their out-of-school lives.**

*“In my classes, I use the current verbiage of students, making cultural references about historical events e.g. “you heard about the trouble over in Israel/Palestine last week? The bombings and missile strikes? This is an issue that's been with us since the crusades...”*

High school teacher – Florida  
Teaches American History and World History  
16+ years of teaching experience

*“I usually find YouTube videos that address the content we are discussing in a different way or*



*from a different perspective. Parody skits, videos that turn historical events into song, etc. are usually good at helping my students grasp some of the more difficult concepts discussed in class. I would like to use more, because it does seem to make the content more relevant for my students."*

High school teacher – Indiana  
Teaches World History and Government  
11-15 years of teaching experience

*"I make references to compare things that are relevant to students right now. I think it helps them build real world connections and understand what is happening in the world, and grasp a better understanding of what they're learning."*

High school teacher – Texas  
Teaches American History  
4-10 years of teaching experience

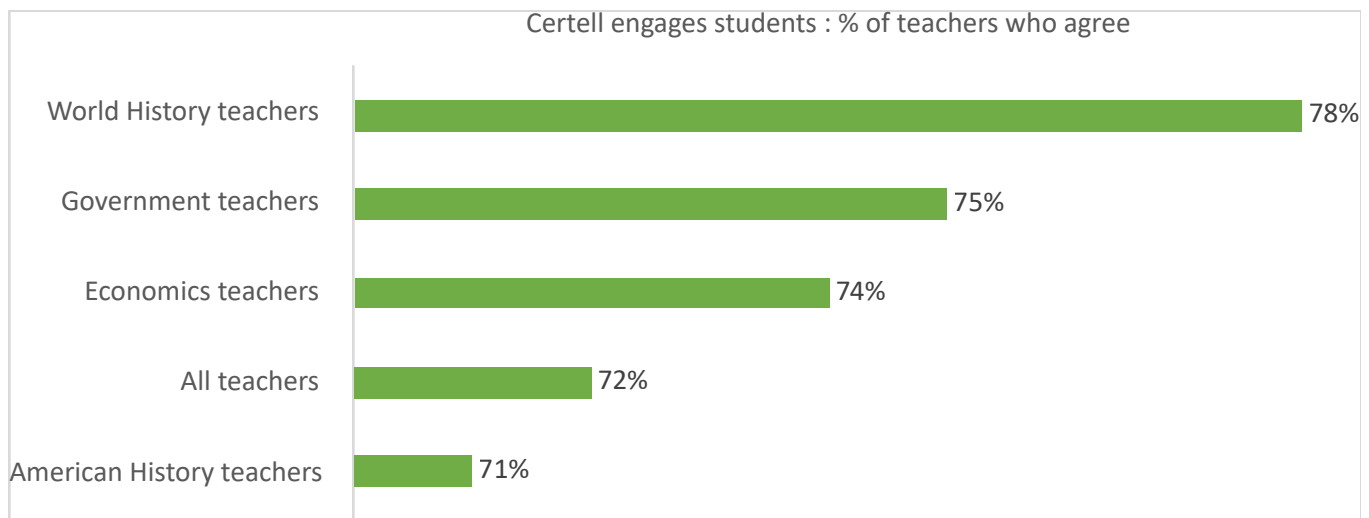
### **Understanding the Value: Views of Teachers using Certell's Poptential**

To fully appreciate the relevancy and value of using pop culture references and content within History and Social Studies classrooms, the study examined the views of approximately 100 teachers who are currently using Certell's Poptential curriculum. The Poptential courses, available for American History, World History, U.S. Government/Civics and Economics, include e-books, lessons, bell ringers, quizzes and tests as well as teacher support materials to facilitate high impact instruction. Additionally, the Poptential resources include a rich set of pop culture media to make lessons engaging and relatable to today's digitally savvy students. The Poptential teachers and their students provide a valuable experiential perspective on the use of the Certell curriculum and the impact of integrating pop culture within History and Social Studies courses.

#### *Engages students in learning*

Both teachers and students agree that the use of the Certell e-books and related pop culture content increases student engagement in the learning process. Across all content areas, over 7 in 10 teachers validated the connection between Poptential and student engagement (Chart B). For example, **78% of World History teachers say that their students are more engaged in learning the course content when using the Certell e-book and related content.**

**Chart B: Teachers agree that students are more engaged in learning when using the Certell curriculum**



*“In my opinion, the pop culture references and content are the best part of the e-books! I have used so many of the videos in my lecture this year and they really help the students understand the material.”*

High school teacher – New Jersey  
Teaches American History and World History  
4-10 years of teaching experience

Correspondingly, 84% of students polled say the inclusion of the pop culture references and video content helped them with their learning. Students also believe that they were more engaged with the learning process in their History or Social Studies classes because of the inclusion of the Certell e-book.

### *Enhances teacher effectiveness*

The teachers identified several benefits to using the Poptential curriculum in their courses. The top benefits expressed include:

- Ease of use for students and teachers
- Simple implementation that saves time for teachers
- Lack of bias in the content
- Supports the development of students’ critical thinking skill development
- Content stimulates class discussion

Relative to the role of the content in stimulating rich class discussions, the teachers specifically called out the pop culture videos as driving that benefit, with 84% identifying the videos as valuable in their instructional practice. **Across the different content areas, teachers’ agreement about the value of the videos was highly consistent, with 91% of Economics teachers and 83% of American History teachers endorsing the value of the videos as well.**

Other aspects of the Poptential curriculum that teachers found highly valuable as well included:

- E-book content (97% of the teachers said this was valuable)
- Discussion questions (93% said this was valuable)
- Readings (90% said this was valuable)
- Bell ringers (86% said this was valuable)

*“I really like the readings. My students, even my ELL students, can break it into chunks and understand it. I also like the discussion questions. I have my students do them as a journal entry first and then discuss it as a small group. In discussing their answers together, it really helps the students who had trouble getting the concept from their first read through. It’s a good flow. It creates a good dynamic.”*

High school teacher – Arkansas  
Teaches Economics, Government and Personal Finance  
11-15 years of teaching experience

Given these strong valuations on the components of the curriculum, it follows that a high percentage of teachers would also say that the use of the Certell resources enhanced their effectiveness as a teacher. As depicted in Table 1, **90% of the teachers agreed that they are a more effective teacher because of their access to the Certell curriculum.**



**Table 1: Teachers agree that they are more effective when using the Certell curriculum**

Teachers by course assignment	% of teachers that agree
All teachers polled	90%
Government teachers	96%
Economics teachers	94%
American History teachers	90%
World History teachers	89%

*“One of the reasons that I started using Certell was that it was so easy to use. Not an overly complicated dashboard. Just straightforward. And so I found that it actually saves me time using Certell than trying to use a whole bunch of other tools that don’t fit with the way I teach.”*

High school teacher – Indiana  
Teaches Government  
4-10 years of teaching experience

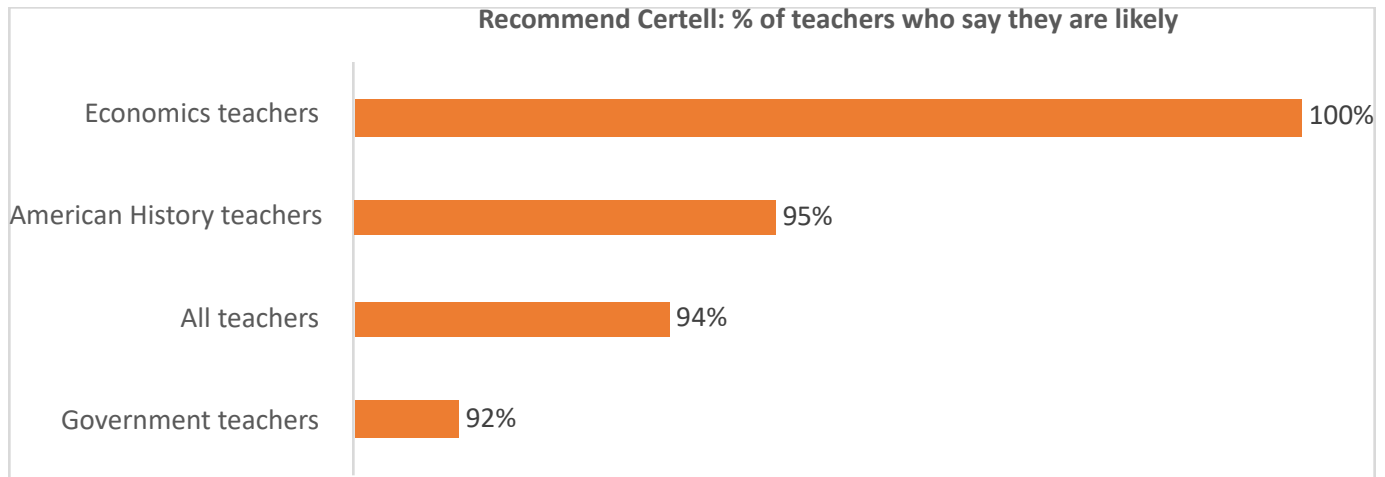
#### *Would recommend to another teacher*

As part of the study, teachers were asked the likelihood that they would recommend Poptential to another teacher or colleague to use in their own classroom. This summative statement on the likelihood of making a recommendation is a particularly compelling statement on the value of the Certell curriculum for these teachers. Most teachers are naturally reluctant to recommend a new learning model, instructional strategy or product to another teacher or colleague. The view is that every teacher’s class or environment is different and unique, and thus, a success with any new product or model in one classroom may simply not be effectively transferrable to another teacher’s environment.

Given that, it is significant that not only did 94% of the educators say that it is likely they would recommend Poptential to a friend or colleague, but 53% said it was *highly likely* that they would do so. As illustrated in Chart C, this high value is not impacted by the course assignments of the teachers. **Across all course content areas, more than 92% of the teachers said they are likely to recommend Poptential to another teacher.** Additionally, among teachers who say that the pop culture videos were very valuable to them, 75% of those teachers say it is *highly likely* they would recommend Certell.



**Chart C: Teachers are likely to recommend Poptential to another teacher**



The high value that teachers have for Poptential is strongly represented in their willingness to recommend the curriculum and resources to a colleague or another teacher.

## **Appendix**

### **About Project Tomorrow**

Project Tomorrow is a nationally recognized, education nonprofit organization with a focus on understanding the impact of new learning models and interventions on student outcomes and teacher effectiveness. Our mission is to help education, business and policy leaders make the best decisions for education through the effective use of research-based insights that highly leverage the authentic views and perspectives of K-12 stakeholders, notably students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Our work includes the highly regarded Speak Up Research Project and an annual series of customized evaluation, feedback and efficacy studies that examine key trends in education. Learn more at [www.tomorrow.org](http://www.tomorrow.org).

### **About Certell, Inc.**

Certell is a 501(c)3 nonprofit whose mission is to create informed and engaged citizens by supporting innovative teachers who are disrupting the traditional civic education system. Certell is the creator of Poptential, a family of free social studies courses that pair pop culture media with engaging digital storytelling for effective, dynamic learning. Poptential is used by teachers in all 50 states. For more information, go to [certell.org](http://certell.org) or on Twitter @CertellOrg.