

Defining Success with Big Ideas: A New Teacher's Growth and Challenges

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This article is a compellation of my work with big ideas and my findings based on that work for the second semester of the 2006-2007 school year. I worked with three 11th grade students that have in the past struggled to pass the Global Studies Regents exam. The class was created as a RCT (Regents Competency Test) preparation course. The purpose of this class, as it was told to me in January, was to give these students the skills and motivation they needed to pass the Global Studies RCT in June. I encountered many obstacles along the way, attendance issues, IEP modifications, miscommunication between myself and administration, and poor student self-efficacy. My personal goal was to incorporate big ideas into every class in hopes that this method would combat some of the problems I was facing with the students. Having been a first year teacher during this experience, I still held much of my idealistic enthusiasm for teaching with big ideas. This article focuses on the struggles, successes and disappointments I faced incorporating big ideas into my work with this small group of struggling students.

Big ideas—everything in my first year of teaching seemed like a big idea. I had to find my voice, modify my goals, and navigate the politics and culture of my school environment. Fresh out of college and my education classes, I jumped into the classroom with all the drive and ambition a new teacher could have. I wanted to make a difference; I wanted to teach in a way that resonated with my students; I wanted to prepare my students to succeed in a world of standardized tests and high expectations. Big ideas, I thought, fit into my teaching goals; they would help me bring the intricacies of history into perspective for my students while at the same time giving them the skills and confidence to succeed on the state exam. When I learned about the concept of big ideas I was excited to put them into practice. This idea allowed me to think beyond the core curriculum and state tests and develop questions that would anchor my unit and get my students thinking. Each question was designed to facilitate higher level thinking while at the same time lending interest and enthusiasm to the topic. The concept of big ideas motivated me, and I wanted them to motivate my students as well.

I started my first year teaching four classes of Global History and Geography I (ancient world history to the Renaissance) and one class of Global History and Geography II (world history from the Age of Exploration to the present). In the second semester, I was given a new assignment. My task: to prepare a small group of students for the upcoming Global History state

exam in June, students who had been unsuccessful with this exam on multiple occasions. By this time, I had a semester of teaching under my belt and felt eager to take on this new challenge. I felt that this would be the perfect avenue to test my theories on big ideas; I could condense the curriculum, make it relevant to the students through the use of big ideas, and have tangible results to analyze in only a few months time. I felt confident that I could help them succeed.

Despite my enthusiasm and confidence, the semester did not develop as I had hoped. Unforeseen obstacles lay in my path, and I found myself confronting my beliefs not only about my ability to teach, but also about the very approach I was taking to help my students. Nothing could have prepared me for the miscommunication among guidance counselors, administrators, myself, and the students, or the struggles of teaching unsuccessful students to believe they have a chance. I had to define what success with big ideas meant to me and to my students despite the obstacles I faced and the conventional standards I struggled to meet.

Background: My School Setting and Personal Ambitions

I was apprehensive in starting my first official teaching job. I was fresh out of school, 23 years old, and entering a world of smug teenagers who could care less about social studies. I did not want to portray my anxiety outwardly because I knew if I did the students would eat me alive and my administrators would question my abilities. Being young, female, and petite, I have been constantly questioned about my ability to demonstrate authority with high school students. I knew I could do it, but I was anxious to prove that fact to everyone else. I was on a mission, a mission that only a young, idealistic teacher can have: I was going to motivate students to love social studies, teach them the skills to succeed in life, and prepare them to excel on the state social studies exam. I was armed with a bachelor's degree in history and a newly-received teaching certificate from New York State. I believed that one of my biggest assets was my knowledge of the big idea concept. I was going to anchor every lesson and every unit with information that was relevant and interesting to my students. Feeling confident with my plan but trepidation about my limited experience, I walked into my classroom with mixed emotions.

My student population is unique. I work in a charter school that draws students from both urban and suburban areas of western New York. The majority of my students come from middle or low income households. My classes are racially and ethnically diverse; I have almost an even distribution of African American and White students, with a few Latino students mixed in. I find

this combination of students both exciting and challenging. Most of our families use our school as an alternative to urban public schools. We have a dress code, strict discipline policies, and a longer school day and year. The mission is to provide a private-like education for urban students and at no cost to the families. Since the beginning, I have been excited to teach my population of students; they are students that can benefit a great deal from me and from our school. The students have the option to succeed and excel, or to return to neighborhoods with little promise of upward social mobility. Most of them want to succeed, and I want to help them reach those goals.

My initial enthusiasm was tempered when I was given no curriculum other than the massive state Global History and Geography curriculum and no mentor. With the exception of the textbook, I was truly on my own. I liked some of the information in the textbook, but I did not like its organization so I tried to use it as a tool rather than as a crutch. I wanted to incorporate big ideas, but I also wanted to survive from day to day, something that does not often result in innovative and ambitious teaching. So for the first semester, I put the big ideas on the back burner; I thought I would get around to them once I had more time and experience. Then, in my second semester of teaching I was presented with a new option: Another teacher and I would switch courses. He would teach my section of Global History II and I would teach his Regents test preparation course to students who had previously failed the exam. I was excited about the change because it seemed to me the perfect opportunity to start using big ideas. I was starting fresh with new students, students who needed a new way to learn Global History. I saw this as my chance to try out big ideas in hopes that the students would find more success with the content if I could help them relate to it. I agreed to the change and started planning my strategies to help these three 11th grade students succeed on the New York state exam in June. I was jumping into a new experience with both excitement and anxiety. Would big ideas work? Could I really help these students pass the state exam? How would I deal with their Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and special needs? I had many questions, though none of which seemed unanswerable.

A Unique Set of Challenges: The Course, the Tests, and the Administration

Big ideas were the first thing to come into my mind as I started planning for my new class. I knew I had three students, all had some sort of learning disability, and that each had

failed the Global Regents exam twice. In New York state, the Global exam is taken at the end of the students' sophomore year, after completing two year-long courses in world history. In 9th grade, students prehistoric times through the late middle ages. Then in 10th grade, students continue their chronological study, moving from the late middle ages through the present. The culmination of these courses is a three-hour state exam that tests them on material from both years of study. The test consists of 50 multiple-choice questions, five-six constructed-response questions, and two essays, one of which is a Document-Based Question. Needless to say, this is a great deal of information for students to remember. The Global exam has the lowest pass rate of any Regents exam in our school. The previous year, only 55 percent of students passed the exam. Given this situation, the social studies faculty faced a great deal of pressure to improve scores. Our school's charter from New York state is renewed based on our test scores, therefore our scores had to increase if we wanted to remain open. I felt the pressure, but I was convinced that this particular population of students would truly benefit from a Global course based in big ideas.

I met briefly with both the principal and the guidance counselor to discuss the students and the course. The guidance counselor made it clear to me that the main goal was to get these students to pass. She wanted them to graduate and to graduate on time. Her fear was that if they did not pass this exam in June, that they would be doomed to be held back. June 2008 saw the graduation of our first senior class, and the administration wanted the highest graduation rate possible and for a high percentage of our students to be accepted into college.

At this time, I was told that the students would be taking the Regents Competency Test (RCT) in June, instead of the standard Regents exam, as a way to increase their likelihood of success and ultimately the likelihood of graduation. The RCT, which is being phased out, is set up much differently than the standard Regents exam. There is only one essay to write and the multiple choice questions are relatively simple. I had no experience with the RCT exam; I had never even seen one. I expressed those concerns to the principal and both she and I agreed to search for old RCT exams in order to familiarize ourselves with the format. I searched online for copies of the test, and I relied on the principal to find hard copies. Despite this new and uncertain situation, I felt confident I could help these students to succeed on the test. I started my planning with big ideas on my mind.

For me, teaching with big ideas meant making history real for my students. Social studies teachers often hear about how the subject they teach is students' least favorite. Students reported

finding history boring and without relevance to their lives. I have always felt that, if history could be presented in a way that related to students' lives and experiences, then social studies could be more than dates and dead political leaders; it could be human and interesting. I especially felt that this approach was what my struggling students needed. They needed to feel that history is tangible and approachable, and that they could be successful with the content. My goal was to show them that the events of the past and the events of the present are rooted in current ideas and emotions. If they could grasp the emotions and ideas behind history, then maybe they could make the connections the state exam expects of them. So I tried to think about how my students could relate their lives to the topics at hand. I intended to plan logically and personally so that I could cover as much content as possible, while making that content personal to my students.

As I thought about the test preparation course, I realized that I did not have nearly enough time to cover the entire two years of curriculum in one semester. So my first order of business was to condense the material down into essential units of study and then bring the units together through the use of big ideas. My plan was to have big ideas anchor each unit and lesson, and each big idea would be in the form of a question. I would have a main big idea for each unit, then use supplementary big idea questions for every class. I saw the students every other day for 68 minutes per period. Because I wanted them to write, at least a little bit, everyday, I decided that journaling was a good way to get them thinking, writing, and talking about ideas. I believed that structure and continuity was a good way to help the students feel more confident with the material so I organized the classes as follows:

- Big idea question written on the board
- Students enter class, read the big idea, then write a journal entry responding to the question
- Class discussion of the question
- Present the lesson--this is where I would present content to the students. Although it was material they were supposed to have learned before, for the most part, it was new to them. My methods varied depending on the topic.
- Revisiting the big idea—here I led class discussion of the big idea based on the material learned in the lesson

After reviewing the material in the Global curriculum, I broke the semester down into nine units with about two weeks (about 5 classes) devoted to each topic. I broke my units (see Table 1) down according to the material that seemed to appear most frequently on past exams.

Table 1
Big Ideas for Regents Test Preparation

UNIT	BIG IDEA
Unit 1—Geography and Culture	How does where you live affect how you live?
Unit 2- Greece and Rome	How have the thoughts of people of the past influenced the thoughts of people today?
Unit 3- World Religions	Why can religion lead to conflict and violence?
Unit 4- Africa	How does diversity affect the way people live?
Unit 5- Asia	What allows people to be successful and prosperous?
Unit 6- Europe and Latin America	How do people of different cultures influence one another?
Unit 7- Revolution and Industry	What is the difference between violent revolutions and non-violent revolutions?
Unit 8- The world at war	How does war change people and societies?
Unit 9- Post WWII	Why has the world become so interconnected?

Since each unit consisted of only about five lessons, I felt that the use of a big idea for each unit and lesson would allow both the students and me to approach a large amount of material in relevant and understandable ways. (See the example of Unit 1 in Table 2.) I wanted them to take away the most essential ideas, but I also wanted them to relate those ideas and events to the present and to their own lives.

Table 2
Unit 1: Geography and Culture

Topic	Big Idea
Day 1: World Geography and Features	How does where you live affect how you live?
Day 2: Defining Culture	How does culture make people who they are?
Day 3: Neolithic Revolution	What made the Neolithic revolution revolutionary?
Day 4: River Valley Civilizations: Egypt and Mesopotamia	Why do people want to live near rivers?
Day 5: River Valley Civilizations: India and China	How does where you live affect how you live?

I knew the students coming into my class would struggle with basic reading and writing and that their confidence in their ability to succeed would be extremely low. These were students who constantly struggled in their other classes and on their exams. I anticipated their skepticism about my ability to help them succeed. So my goals for the course not only consisted of reviewing the material for the exam, but also of strengthening their reading skills, writing skills, appreciation for social studies, and self-efficacy. I thought that if I could make world history relevant to them and show them that the struggles of the past are the same as the struggles today, that they would find that information much easier to recall and use. Conventional methods had obviously not worked to help these students succeed, so I felt that big ideas could truly help them connect with history, and if they could connect with history then their confidence in succeeding on the test would greatly increase.

Success and Struggles: Working with the Students

The day finally came to start working with the students. I could not think about the class in the conventional way. It was not me teaching and them learning, it was all four of us working together to prepare for the exam. I only knew a small amount more about the RCT exam than they did. I had not been able to find any online copies of the RCT exam, and the principal had

not yet delivered any news to me about her findings. All I was armed with were my big ideas and my plans. I approached the course like a workshop, all of us learning together.

As the students came in, the first thing I encountered was skepticism and uncertainty. They accepted my approach to the course and seemed responsive to working with me, but the big ideas took them off guard. I explained the purpose of big ideas to them and why I felt it was important for us to have these ideas to talk about in each class. I asked one of them to read aloud the question, “why do we need to study history?” I gave the class a few minutes to reflect, then I asked them what they thought. They did not seem to know how to respond and, for the first few weeks, this became the pattern: The students would come into class, read the big idea question, and stare off into space waiting for me to tell them the answer. I tried prompting them, but I did not want them to think that I was going to give them the answers. They seemed not to want to think about the questions on their own. When I would encourage them to write something, they would often write “I don’t know” or a brief sentence that merely restated the question. They seemed very reluctant to think for themselves.

And yet, although the students were slow to write responses, they seemed eager to talk about their ideas. I decided it was a good place to start. Beginning that first day, the discussions were productive and provided a good transition into the lessons. It took a good number of classes before the students felt comfortable with the big ideas, however. So I took notes about their responses and about the big idea questions; I reminded myself about what worked and what didn’t, and what big ideas I wanted to repeat or try in a new way.

I discovered that the big ideas to which the students were most responsive were those that related to their lives. They struggled, however, to get passed the idea that the content of social studies was not to be left in the social studies classroom. When we talked about the Scientific Revolution, they seemed surprised to hear names and ideas from science class; the scientific method, Copernicus, and Galileo did not seem like social studies content to them. These students were repeating many other subjects so they often got much of their information confused. Consequently, it was not always easy to find effective big ideas. If they were too general or vague, the students were not always able to elaborate on their own ideas, or they provided vague responses. Sometimes I had to change the big idea question in the middle of class to make it more clear to the students or to give them more of a focus. For example, when I was discussing world religions, I presented the big idea, “how does religion cause conflict?” The students

seemed unsure what I meant by conflict. They wanted to discuss how parents want their children to go to church and remain celibate while the children did not want to comply with those religious norms. Although these points were on the right track, they were not exactly what I was looking for. I decided to ask, “how can religion lead to conflict and violence?” The simple addition of the word “violence” led the students to talk about conflicts that exist between religions and cultures.

As a result, I found myself engaged in a process of creating a big idea, encouraging the students to discuss or write about their reactions to the idea, then helping them expand beyond their initial reactions. I would like to say that it was a science whose pattern I discovered but, in reality it was trial and error everyday’s I was constantly modifying my approach.

It wasn’t until the beginning of March that the students really started to engage with the big ideas. One of the first questions that really got the students motivated was “why do people believe in and participate in religion?” By this point, they felt comfortable writing every class and putting their ideas into the journal entries, but this was the first time I really saw the spark of interest. They came into class, got settled, and immediately started to write. It appeared to be a topic they could understand. Their written entries were tentative and simple, but I felt encouraged that they were grasping and participating with the ideas. For example, one of the students wrote about how “people take religion real personal” and continued to say that people need religion to give them hope and guidance. This entry prompted a discussion about how there are many different religions, especially in the United States, and that the desire to practice religion transcends cultures and societies. Their journal entries had transitioned from consisting of a single sentence or “I don’t know” to paragraphs of four or five sentences. Our conversations had also transitioned: They started as short answers to my prompting questions; now I acted as a participant in the conversations with the students taking more of the lead.

I felt inspired; the big ideas were starting to have the effect I hoped they would. The students engaged with the material and began relating to it by inserting anecdotes from their lives. For example, during a discussion about governments and their effects on society, one of the students said her father was complaining about jobs going to China and how our government needs to do more to get jobs for Americans.

The students’ participation increased as the month continued. In my journal entry on March 19th, I noted that “the kids are getting much more into big ideas. Instead of trying to get

me to do all the talking, they have responses right away. They are drawing on their studies in other courses (US history) and relating those ideas to Global History.” I noticed that they started to express pride in their answers and seemed less apprehensive about participating. Their body language changed and their comments became much more positive. They came into class and, instead of talking about the latest gossip around school, they talked about the big idea or start writing in their journals. They kept their heads up instead of down on their desks. They sought out information from textbooks, the internet, or other sources I had available. Overall, their confidence with the subject seemed to grow.

The big ideas also prompted discussions about topics beyond our scope of study. At first, I was reluctant to get too far off task but, as their questions became in depth and thoughtful, I remembered my goals of helping them improve their life skills and appreciation of social studies. In April, one of our big idea questions was “what makes a society stable and successful?” One of my students came in and, even before she even took her seat, said, “I have an answer to that question!” She sat down right away and began writing her journal entry. This question prompted a student-initiated discussion on world population and how a large population can be a detriment to society. One of the students even went over to a computer to look up population sizes of countries around the world. They were interested and motivated to find out more. Although our lesson did center on world population sizes, I could not hold them back from learning more about the topic.

As the semester started to wind down, I was feeling very encouraged about the progress we had made. I had still not found any tangible resources on the RCT exam, nor had the principal, but I was optimistic nonetheless. I was using old Regents exam questions to help prepare them and working with them on their essay writing skills. I felt sure that their confidence had grown, that their writing skills had improved, and their familiarity with exam-type questions had increased. Our class was not without struggles. Attendance issues, meeting the students’ IEP needs, and reading comprehension all continued to challenge us. Yet none of these problems seemed insurmountable until the end of the semester when an abrupt change took the wind out of our sails.

Our Success Derailed

With a week to go before the June exams, the students and I were feeling confident. We were working on test preparation and coming up with strategies to help them succeed. I had told the students everything I knew about the RCT. I told them that they only had to write one essay. They were confident in their abilities to pass the test, partly because they knew it was a modified version of the Regents exam. When I told the students that they would not have to write a Document-Based Question and that they would have their choice of essays on the RCT, they seemed relieved. All three students said that writing essays was what they felt most apprehensive about. They expressed how much better they felt in being able to choose which topic they wrote about. I gave them as many test-taking tools as possible; we even made an exam schedule together where they charted which exams they had to take on which days and when the review sessions were held.

At the beginning of class a week before the exam, one of my students came into class very upset. She said that the guidance counselor had told her that she was going to be taking the regular Regents exam in Global History next week and, if she failed that, then she would be taking the RCT exam. My student was upset because she was afraid to fail the Regents exam. She said that she didn't feel prepared for the Regents exam and that she would feel horrible if she failed again. All she wanted to do was take the RCT. I told her that I had not heard that she had to take the Regents exam, but that I would find out. I called the guidance counselor to come and speak to all of us. The counselor came into class and relayed the news to me and the other students: She said that she wanted the students to try and pass the Regents exam and, if they failed, then they could take the RCT. She said that they should push themselves to pass the Regents since that was the "better" exam to pass.

I was upset and my students could see it. They were upset and feeling defeated. They expressed anger that they were just being informed about taking the Regents exam. They said that they did not think it was fair because they were not ready. I agreed with them, but knew it would not be wise to imply that I didn't think they could pass the Regents exam. I remembered one student asking me, "why do they make us keep taking this test. It's like they want to make us feel stupid." Given this new circumstance, I wanted to have some words of encouragement, but I could only empathize with my students and tell them I would help as much as I could. But they were lost to me after this news. All the fear and doubt I had worked so hard to rid them of was back.

That five minute conversation trumped five months of work. I wanted to yell and scream that it wasn't fair, but I was in an odd situation: I did not want my students to think that I believed they couldn't pass the Regents exam. After all, most of the review material we had been using was geared toward the Regents exam. I asked the guidance counselor to stay with the class and I went to talk to the principal. I told her of my frustration and anger that I had not been made aware of this situation before the students. She said that it was the plan all along and that I must have misinterpreted the purpose of the course. I felt confused about why she and I had worked so hard to find information on the RCT exam when she really wanted them to be preparing for the Regents exam. I doubted myself and what we had discussed. I told her that I felt the students would be more successful if we just had them take the RCT, but she would not have that. She wanted the students to take the exam in hopes that they would pass. She said she felt that my preparing them this past semester was enough and that we might as well see how they do. She added, "we need to give them another chance to take the real exam. You never know, they may just pass." I could not make her see that by doing that, she was setting them up to fail. I also did not want to say I felt sure they would fail because that would not have reflected well on my confidence in the students. I felt ashamed that I had not prepared them well enough for the assessments they needed to take. I had had the mindset for the entire semester that they would be taking the RCT, so I felt they would be adequately prepared to pass. Once I learned that they were taking the more challenging Regents exam, I felt unsure that I had done enough. I was apprehensive about them having to write a Document-Based Question when we had not spent any time reviewing the format. I felt like giving up.

I went back to class and tried to reassure the students that it was going to be fine, and that they were prepared for both exams. The students reacted with frustration and defeat. They seemed almost as if they were resigned to fail. They did not yell or get outwardly upset, but I could tell by their expressions and body language that their confidence was shattered. I reassured them as best I could, we re-wrote our exam calendars, and they went on their way.

A week later, all three students failed the Regents exam and then the RCT. I was crushed. I felt that we had worked so hard and made so much progress. The students did not seem surprised. When I spoke with one after the exam, she said she felt she could never pass the Global History exam no matter what she did. She added, "I never really thought I was going to pass, I always fail exams. I'm not taking it again." It was disappointing because not long ago she

had been enthusiastic and interested. Now she seemed even more defeated then when the class started.

No other teachers or administrators blamed me for the students' exam results; I think they expected them to fail anyway. But I blamed myself. I questioned my methods and my approach to the course. I spent a good amount of time going over my notes and plans, contemplating what I could have done differently. In the end, I decided that where I felt the most successful was when we were discussing big ideas and I started to believe that those conversations generated much more confidence in my students than any graphic organizers, notes, or test reviews we attempted. I decided not to judge my success on the state exams, but on the changes I saw from January to June. Doing so may help me get through the day, but I wondered if it would be enough to help me keep my job. With so much riding on test scores and graduation rates could I really judge success in any other way? I may not know the answers to these questions right away, but hopefully with experience will come enlightenment.

Conclusion: What I Learned and My Hope for Big Ideas

My hopes were that the students would be able to use big ideas as a way to bring history alive. Was my goal achieved? That depends on what ends I assess. If I look at their exam scores, no, my goals with big ideas were not achieved. The students did not do better on the exam because I focused my lessons on big ideas. But if I focus on another end, their responses and participation in class by the end of the semester, then, yes, using big ideas was very successful. The students started to think for themselves; they did not wait for me to tell them what to think. They told me stories from their own lives that related to topics of government, society, or economics; they talked about how topics of religion or politics related to their beliefs and experiences. I could see that they were invested and interested in the material because they spoke about history being evident in their lives. They did not rely on guided worksheets on which all their answers were merely copied from a book. Their journal entries expressed their thoughts, prompted only by a question unlikely to be found in a textbook. Instead of sitting mindlessly and copying down notes from an overhead, my students researched information on their own, asked questions, and found their own answers. They were active learners engaged in the material.

I found that I was excited to try out my big ideas in each class. I was anxious to hear what they would say and how they could relate to the material. I then found it much easier to

incorporate big ideas into my 9th grade Global History classes. I was able to take units on the Middle Ages in Europe or the religion of Islam and formulate big ideas that I would not have considered in the past. I began planning my units around big ideas like “what made the Dark Ages dark?” My self-efficacy had improved along with that of my students. I felt encouraged that I could make history meaningful for my students and that ancient history did not have to be dull and lifeless. I was able to see themes and trends in history much more easily once I had opened my mind to big ideas. I was no longer confined to the textbook or the state curriculum, and it was liberating. In the beginning of the year, I felt as if I were drowning and the textbook was my life preserver; by the end, I was confident enough to form a curriculum on my own, taking pieces from many different sources and weaving them together with big ideas.

I try not to think of my three students in the RCT prep course as my guinea pigs, but they did help me learn how to find my own style of teaching. They gave me hope for teaching with big ideas and gave me the confidence to move out of my comfort zone. Although they, and I, were not conventionally successful, I know that my teaching is better because of my experience with them; I can only hope that their minds have been opened and their skills have improved because of working with me.