Pedagogical Content Knowledge for World History Teachers

Bridging the Gap between Knowing and Teaching

Due to copyright restrictions, the following is a condensed version of the article that appears in the print edition of the magazine. Please contact us at amered@afa.org to receive a complimentary print or electronic copy of the longer version.

BY LAUREN McARTHUR HARRIS AND ROBERT B. BAIN

We are conducting studies to determine what knowledge world history teachers need and how they can use it to plan instruction. Here, we report on a small but in-depth study designed to examine how four pre-service and six in-service world history teachers think about, organize, and make meaning of separate world historical events, for themselves and their students.

The teachers were asked to organize a seemingly random stack of cards listing 18 historical events and concepts into a “big historical picture” by placing each card on butcher paper, adding labels, and drawing lines to connect events and give them meaning. While the participants sorted the cards, they talked aloud about their decisions, revealing their thinking. Teachers did the card sort twice: first, to capture their own understandings, and second, to explain how (or if) they might structure those events for instruction.

The differences among the 10 teachers were stunning. Although all the teachers drew connections or categorized events along temporal-spatial scales at some point or another, there were discernable differences in how the more experienced world history teachers built connections among events, constructed coherent historical narratives, related world historical content to students’ understandings, and employed such conceptual devices as cross-cultural or temporal comparisons or examples as pedagogical tools for organizing instruction. The experienced world history teachers not only constructed complicated conceptual maps with more multiple and fluid connections among events, but also, although not prompted to do so, began to classify events as global, cross-regional, or regional, and to explain connections among events situated at the different scales. For example, Figure 1 (on page 14) shows the initial card sort by the most experienced teacher. He filled the space between cards with connecting lines and/or language to show dynamic relationships among and between events, regardless of their region, time period, or scale.

The inexperienced world history teachers were more likely to simply place the cards in chronological order or within categories, such as economic or governmental groupings. Because some drew connecting lines between categories, such as government and economy—but not among the events—it appears that the categories became more important than the events (see Figure 2 on page 15).

The key difference between the novice and experienced teachers appeared to be the teachers’ knowledge of global world history and their ability to attend to students’ needs in learning world history, including likely misconceptions and points of interest. For example, one experienced teacher used some cards twice in his instructional organization, explaining that students needed a big picture of the global story at the beginning of his course and that they would later return to those same events to study them in more depth (see Figure 3 on page 16).

Beyond the type of history courses typically taken by history majors, history teachers need courses offering the knowledge and skills needed to create coherent and flexible organizational schemes. Knowledge of both particular events and possible connections spanning centuries, millennia, nations, continents, and hemispheres seems to enable teachers to develop and teach more meaningful connections.

Lauren McArthur Harris is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan and a former high school world history teacher. Robert B. Bain is an associate professor in the School of Education and in the Department of History within the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Previously, he taught high school history and social studies for 26 years. This article is adapted with permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, www.taylorandfrancis.com, from “Pedagogical Content Knowledge for World History Teachers: What Is It? How Might Prospective Teachers Develop It?” The Social Studies, Volume 102, Issue 1, January 2011, pages 9–17, copyright 2011.
Fundamental to all that follows

Sedentism, towns, city-states
1. warfare
2. monumental architecture
3. tribute
4. writing

Representative of the role of migrants and nomads generally

= 3 most historically significant events

- Neolithic Agricultural Revolution
- Development of Written Language
- Bantu Migrations
- Map of the Silk Routes
- Development and Spread of Buddhism
- Decline of the Han Empire
- Development of the Incan Road System
- Columbian Exchange
- Atlantic Slave Trade
- The Haitian Revolution
- Mansa Musa Becomes King of Mali
- The Mongol Empire
- The Naval Voyages of Cheng Ho (Zheng He)
- Feudalism
- Johannes Gutenberg Develops the Printing Press
- The Renaissance
- Industrial Revolution
- The Meiji Restoration
- World War I
- Colonial War?
- India Gains Independence from Great Britain
- Cold War
- New-Euro Unification
- Competitive Commercial City-states Very powerful
- Spread of ideas
- Competitive Commercial City-states Very powerful
- End of colonialism but world already divided
- Partly responsible for end of colonialism
- Outdated Now more complex

Afro-Eurasian unification
Cultural Exchange
Buddhism in China
Newest global religion uses Silk Roads
Last unification Silk Roads revived?
China engaged then withdraws

★
★★
Figure 2: A novice world history teacher’s first card-sort map

**Individuals who have made a significant impact on different cultures**
- The Naval Voyages of Cheng Ho (Zheng He)
- Bantu Migrations
- Columbian Exchange
- Atlantic Slave Trade
- Development of the Incan Road System
- The Mongol Empire
- Map of the Silk Routes
- Mansa Musa Becomes King of Mali
- Johannes Gutenberg Develops the Printing Press

**Conflict (violent & non-violent)**
- The Haitian Revolution
- Cold War
- World War I

**Transportation of goods/people**
- Development of Written Language
- Development and Spread of Islam
- Development and Spread of Buddhism

**General developments affecting the entire world**
- Industrial Revolution
- The Meiji Restoration
- Neolithic Agricultural Revolution
- The Renaissance

**Events shaping both physical and cultural boundaries of nations**
- India Gains Independence from Great Britain
- Decline of the Han Empire

**Political system**
- Feudalism

**Cultural movements/economic changes**

★ = 3 most historically significant events
Figure 3: An experienced world history teacher’s second card-sort map (instructional organization)

**Intro: “Big Picture”**

- Neolithic Agricultural Revolution
- Development of Written Language
- Development and Spread of Buddhism
- Columbian Exchange
- World War I
- Cold War

**Empires**

- Development and Spread of Islam
- Bantu Migrations
- Decline of the Han Empire

**Post-Classical**

- Feudalism
- Mansa Musa Becomes King of Mali
- Map of the Silk Routes
- The Mongol Empire
- Development and Spread of Buddhism

**Early Modern**

- The Renaissance
- The Naval Voyages of Cheng Ho (Zheng He)
- Industrial Revolution
- Columbian Exchange
- Atlantic Slave Trade

**Modern**

- The Haitian Revolution
- The Meiji Restoration

**20th Century**

- World War I
- India Gains Independence from Great Britain
- Cold War

- Did not use: Development of the Incan Road System

★ = 3 most historically significant events
S = most challenging for students

Note: This teacher used some cards more than once.