

Planning the World History Course: A Reasoned Approach to Omission

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Let's be clear: planning a world history course presents a nearly impossible task. One cannot complete a world history course, or even a European history course, without casting a huge amount of historical information onto the curriculum planning scrapheap. A thorough coverage of the antecedents of modern times invariably means that one never gets to modern times. An emphasis on the twentieth century means leaving out significant information from earlier times. What?! Leave out ancient Egypt? Rome? The Middle Ages? West Africa's Songhai Empire? The Han Dynasty? Any world history curriculum planning team dissolves into a heated exchange as teachers seek to hold on to their favorite units, each asking, "But how can the kids understand topic 'y' if they haven't covered 'x'?"



The French revolution: Burning the royal carriages at the Chateau d'Eu, Feb. 24, 1848 (N. Currier/
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Let's also be clear about an important fact: as much as those of us who teach history believe in the importance of the subject, we must reluctantly acknowledge that millions of people lead happy, productive, and fulfilling lives without knowing anything about the Han or

Songhai Dynasties, or about Ikhnaton, Pericles, Caligula, and Charlemagne. And while such individuals may know virtually nothing about the modern world as well, they will be quick to tell us they can always "look it up." Are world history teachers engaged in a fool's errand if we

can't finish what we start? Is there a case to be made for a world history course? This brief essay will suggest that there is a case—but only if we redefine what we expect to accomplish.

The first step in building a case for world history is to distinguish between "historical information" and "history." Anyone committed to teaching a world history survey course is more than likely committed to teaching "historical information"—the coverage of vast amounts of information organized and held together by a textbook of considerable weight. One can dress it up with terms like "discovering" our past, "inquiry," or building a "broad perspective," but the essential course is all too often what cynics have called a "mad dash to the present." If one hopes to cover vast amounts of historical information, a mad dash is the only way to do it. When the dash is completed, a teacher is likely to experience the unkindest cut of all: most students will remember very little of that information. Ask any college world history professor about the high school history preparation of his or her students and you will likely encounter some combination of sputtering, profanity, or a head shaking in dismay. We all know that the condemnation is unfair; how can one expect a 19-year old student to remember much of what she or he was taught at age 15? But both the condemnation and its excuse point up the essential dilemma for those teachers of a world history survey course: what is the point of the coverage, if the information covered is not retained?

If not retention, what is it that coverage is supposed to accomplish? To answer that question a teacher would usually look to the school's mission statement, the department's mission statement, and the usual claims one makes for the value of history. Compare our claims for the value of history to our approach to teaching a world history survey course. Compare the stated goals of that world history course with the history/social studies department's goals and the school's mission. Then compare these statement goals with the world history course assessments. Most assessment activities I have seen are devoted almost entirely to memorization—consistent with a goal of coverage, but likely out of line with the broader purposes expressed in those professional, district, school and department claims.

Is there another approach? Is there a way to bring a world history course into line with both what we want for our students and the claims we make for the value of our discipline? One answer might be to slow down that mad dash long enough to teach “history.” Consider the claims we make for our discipline. Good history is an integrative subject; at a minimum, good history combines geography, government, economics, and other social sciences, along with art and music. Good history invites comparison of one event with another, one leader with another, or one nation's achievements with those of another. Good history is a window to our achievements as well as our failures. Good history is a detective story—the search for evidence, the analysis and evaluation of that evidence, critical reading of primary and secondary sources and thoughtful writing. Good history requires the analysis of cause and effect. Good history challenges us to “walk in the shoes of another,” in another time and another place, to try to know the limits of his or her experience and the range of choices in making a decision. And good history asks us to examine how people in both the past and today have used and perhaps abused history to build a political argument.

Good history includes assessment activities that are in line with those claims. How many assessment activities challenge a student to compare and contrast, read primary sources, evaluate evidence and make a judgment based on a range of conflicting evidence? Certainly, advanced placement world history would require such activities in its survey course, with the most able and highly motivated students. Indeed, failure to do so would place those students at risk when they take the advanced placement exam. What then for the rest of our students? How do we integrate good history, and good assessment into their world history experience?

Could we ask students to rank order the significance of the causes of an event? Could we ask students to account for differences in two short quotations expressing different views of the same event? Could we ask students to use maps or statistical data to describe or explain a trend over time? Could we ask students to evaluate the relevance or reliability of a primary document? Could we ask students to interpret a cartoon? British history exams routinely ask students to demonstrate their ability to perform these tasks.

In short, we must recognize that “history,” as compared with “historical information,” is as much about “how” as it is about “what.” How do we find information about an event? How do we determine if the information is accurate and/or relevant? How do we judge conflicting evidence? How do we judge a person or event in the past—by the times in which the action took place, or by present standards? And how do we use the answers to those questions to make decisions in our daily lives as citizens?

The usual rejoinder to all of this is that there is no time in a world history course to have students dig into primary materials and weigh evidence. My rejoinder to that rejoinder is perhaps a bit impertinent. I am aware of no religious tract, constitutional amendment, or law that states, “You must try to cover all of world history.” Commitment to

cover the maximum amount of historical information is a choice one makes, and it is a choice the teacher, department and school can reject. Choosing coverage is to confine a student's experience to the “information” of history rather than the history we have defined above. Choosing coverage is limiting the student's chance to learn more about *how* we learn history, and *how* we use or misuse history. In the worst case, choosing coverage is limiting a student's history experience to memorization and ignoring the potential of history to serve as a vehicle for the thinking skills that mirror skills needed to function as citizens.

How does one teach “history” in a world history course? Some of us have been challenged in our professional training to have “the courage to omit.” Even those committed to the information coverage of a world history survey course leave out something. As noted above, it's usually the present. Omission begins with criteria for what to include. If the course is to be “world” history, one must include topics and time-periods from non-Western cultures. If one purpose of the course is to promote student use of primary materials, one would want to choose periods or events that contain some degree of controversy in both the event itself as well as the interpretation of that event by historians—the French or Russian Revolutions come to mind. If one purpose of a world history course is to study the role of leadership in history, one might examine Nelson Mandela's role in the ending of apartheid, or Gandhi's role in winning India's independence. If another purpose of the course is the examination of the life of an average person in a historical time, any number of time periods come to mind: Medieval Europe, contemporary China, or nineteenth-century industrial England, to name a few. If one goal is the examination of cultural achievement, one might explore Periclean Athens, the Italian Renaissance, or any of several Chinese dynasties, or time periods in what we now call the “Middle East.” And if one is to explore examples of humankind's



Nelson Mandela waves to thousands of his supporters on February 11, 1990, in Cape Town during his address in freedom after spending 27 years in jail. (AP Photo)

greatest failures, one might include the world wars of the twentieth century, or the Holocaust.

Such a course would likely shape up as thematic rather than chronological, although the themes can be arranged in some chronological order. Within each event or era or person under study, students can be challenged to explore primary and secondary materials as well as address three important questions: What happened? Why did it happen? Why does it matter? The essential historical questions of cause and effect can remain central to the course. What the teacher and students gain is time to better understand examples of events and historical themes that continue to be played even now. The key here is that these examples are case studies chosen for their appropriateness and potential for high interest. And, yes, in the interest of exploring these examples, many interesting events, people and areas will be omitted.

Are there guidelines for what to omit and what to include? One crude test is what one might call the “faculty room test.” Imagine that you walk into a fac-

ulty room and ask in a loud, agonized tone, “Can you believe that not one student in my class knew who Hitler was!” One would expect that most teachers might turn away from the latest basketball box score or crossword puzzle to offer a murmur of support for your frustration. Now try the same thing substituting Charlemagne or Louis XIV for “Hitler.” Teachers might shake their heads in disbelief,

but it would be *at* you, not *with* you. Yet another test is to consider long standing themes in history. Americans are proud of our nation but often have difficulty recognizing that people in other nations may be just as nationalistic. While geography often plays an important role, there is at least one more reason why Afghanistan has resisted invasion and control by foreign armies, or Vietnamese resented the Chinese as well as their French colonial rulers, or Eastern European nations eventually threw off the yoke of Russian domination. The role of nationalism in human history as both a unifying force and a divisive force has been an ongoing theme to the present day.

All of this should not begin with a world history course in grade nine or ten. Students in middle school often study historical time periods using primary materials. Middle school teachers can encourage critical reading of conflicting information along with writing. A district-wide history curriculum team could collaborate to encourage teachers in younger grades to examine time periods, events, or geographic areas not included in the high school course. One would expect

such courses to explore other cultures as well as relevant concepts in economics, geography, and government, to build and reinforce student knowledge of the range of social studies disciplines. These experiences with history can progress to an American history course in grade eight that approaches history in the same way. In a coordinated curriculum with some topics of history taught for parts of every year in earlier grades, a district can promote an increasing sophistication to a student’s experience with history.

These are simply suggestions, but they come with the need for difficult choices for teachers planning a world history course. One must leave out many very attractive events, people, and periods of history. The omissions may invite public criticism. Omission will not likely please our hypothetical college history teacher. That said, a reasoned approach to omission also provides the teacher with the time and the opportunity to build student understanding of history. Perhaps most important, making the choice to omit helps to provide a case for history. When we challenge students to seek evidence, weigh that evidence, and confront the ambiguity of evidence, we are not only exposing students to the stuff of history, we are challenging them with the stuff of citizenship. The issues we face as citizens are rarely clear-cut. Information about a political candidate or a political issue is often contradictory. Advocates for a political choice—candidate or law—often cite history to make their case. We need to help students develop the skills to identify when historical comparisons or analogies might be stretched, irrelevant, or false. A world history course that teaches “history” provides a critical opportunity to promote thoughtful informed citizenship. We need to encourage world history teachers to make that kind of history the centerpiece of their course. 📖

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