

TEACHING THE WORLD CIVILIZATION SURVEY: A SPHERICAL APPROACH

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It appears that my situation is not untypical of many who have been involved with the dilemma of how best to structure and teach the World Civ Survey from an academic background that included almost no training in non-Western history. Considering the difficulty of giving Western Civ adequate attention in a one- or two-semester survey, the idea of cramming the entire history of humankind into the same time constraints boggles the mind. Questions quickly arise regarding themes or organizational structures that should be used to provide a unifying conceptualization. Most often these questions are answered by choice of textbook, or if time, expertise, and funding is available, by individual teachers or departments who develop their own courses.¹ Nonetheless, the breadth of the subject often makes the choice of a textbook or the individually designed curriculum less cohesive and thus less satisfying than what is comparatively offered, for instance, in texts or course designs dealing with the survey of Western Civ. I have also come to find that even among enthusiastic proponents of world history there remains an uncomfortably broad divergence of opinion about how such a course should be structured.²

This difficulty was addressed by William McNeill, long among a few lone voices crying out for the need to teach history from a global perspective, in a 1990

¹ For an example of an individually designed course, see Kathleen Cohen, "Paths to the Present: An Interdisciplinary Program on World Civilizations," *College Teaching*, 39 (Winter 1991), 21-25.

² For a brief overview of the main structural proposals by some of the most prominent world historians, see Kevin Reilly, "What Is an Attainable Global Perspective for Undergraduates in History?" *The History Teacher*, 18 (August 1985), 501-35; and in the same volume, Lawrence Chase, "Teaching All There Is to Know: The Annales 'Paradigm' and the World History Survey Course," 409-22. A symposium on the pros and cons of World And Western Civilization, along with articles on Global History, appears in a recent issue of *Teaching History*, 10 (Fall 1985). Gilbert Allardyce gives a brief but thorough overview of the treatment of world history as an academic subject in American educational institutions from the late nineteenth century to the present, emphasizing the current struggles of a resurgent interest in world history (a most appropriate topic for the inaugural issue of a new journal), *Journal of World History*, 1 (Spring 1990), 23-76. See also Joe Gowaskie, "The Teaching of World History: A Status Report," *The History Teacher*, 18 (May 1985), 365-75. For a perspective from the high school level that deals with similar problems, see Robert Woyach and Richard Remy, "Strengthening World Studies: The Challenge of Conceptualization," *Social Education*, 52 (November/December 1988), 484-88. Also a brief but helpful critique of various approaches to world history is given by Richard Gross, "World History: What Shall It Be?" *Social Education*, 46 (March 1982), 178-81.

article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.³ Among other things, McNeill noted the current lack of a cohesive conceptualization for teaching world history and made an urgent plea for historians to be innovative in searching out a "well-conceived portrait of the global past." This is currently being done but, according to many experts, has not yet been effectively translated into that "most important" pedagogical aid, the textbook. With growing interest there inevitably will be more textbooks published that will reflect refined research and conceptualization. Until then, the often not-adequately-prepared instructors of the World Civ survey will have to train themselves using the texts available or develop their own courses.

My introduction to teaching world history was as a well-trained Europeanist with very little academic training in non-Western history. Despite the inherent difficulties and my lack of training, I found the arguments for teaching world history very persuasive. Until this year I taught at a college located on the Pacific Rim, in Portland, Oregon, with its immediate and lively exchange with the Orient. This was itself an additional incentive to adopt a more global view. The first two years I taught our two-semester sequence, I used a popular textbook which, like many World Civ texts, was a Western Civ text expanded to cover world history.⁴ Later I used a text that had been conceived from the outset as a world history survey, which provided a more cohesive conceptualization.⁵ With both types of texts, however, I noticed students being somewhat confused by the format. Organized around artificial but helpful periodizations from ancient to modern times, they were asked to "globe-trot" on a chronological scheme. That is, the civilizations studied were those that happened to have a particular prominence somewhere on the globe during a particular periodization. At the next periodization, another trot around the globe was required. A major drawback to this structure is the difficulty of maintaining an understanding of the continuity of development of a particular civilization and its influence throughout a larger region. When students, for instance, are asked to study China during the Chou, Chin, and Han dynasties only to return to the Sui and Tang dynasties *after* having studied the Graeco-Roman, African, North and South American, and Middle Eastern chronological equivalents, it is no wonder that they lose a sense of the continuous historical development of a particular significant world civilization. My

³ William McNeill, "Point of View: Colleges Must Revitalize the Teaching and Study of World History," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 36 (August 8, 1990), 36.

⁴ Walter Wallbank, et al, *Civilization Past & Present*, 5th ed. (Glenview IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982).

⁵ Anthony Esler, *The Human Venture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986). Two of the most commonly used texts based initially on a world history perspective are William McNeill, *A World History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) and L. Stavrianos, *A Global History: The Human Heritage*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991). The only text I've found which follows a somewhat spherical approach is Robert Strayer, Ed., *The Making of the Modern World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), but it deals with world civilizations *since* 1500. Although I have researched many texts, my efforts have not exhausted all possible sources.

experience in following this textbook format has been both problematical and short-lived, because I felt the students were frustrated and confused when following a cyclical approach that continuously disrupted the historical flow of a particular civilization. It was not the periodization that seemed so confusing, but rather the "globe-trotting."

I have found it more comprehensible and meaningful for students to divide the survey into spheres of geographical and cultural unity (most often referred to as World Regions, World Cultures, or sometimes Comparative World History) and then treat that sphere chronologically from ancient to modern times as a complete unit. The following six spheres serve as the major divisions of the course: 1) China, Japan, and Vietnam; 2) India, Southeast Asia, and the East Indies; 3) sub-Sahara Africa; 4) the Islamic Middle East; 5) the Americas and Micronesia; and 6) the West. There are, of course, numerous difficulties in such groupings, not the least of which are the large areas of overlap, for instance, the role of the Middle East for both the Islamic and Western civilizations, and "fringe" areas and events, such as the Mongolian civilization, Australia, and the Philippines. It is, however, not disadvantageous to include these areas and events as historical parts of more than one sphere or relate them to the most relevant sphere during a given time period. The particular text used might also have some bearing on how these areas fit into a spherical structure.

Approaching world history in this way allows for a concentrated study of national and cultural characteristics that developed within these major spheres, recognizing both unique and shared cultural practices and ideals within a continuous historical sequence from ancient to modern times. When civilizations within a given sphere interacted with those from other spheres at various stages of history, the focus is always on the perspective of the former; that is, students can "see" from this particular perspective and develop an understanding of their history from the "inside." For example, in following this approach students will learn about the effects of colonization, de-colonization, and modernization from the perspective of the colonized and developing countries. Later, when the focus of the course is the West, modernization can be viewed more from a Western perspective.

Because the students have received an "inside" view of world civilizations from ancient to modern times, albeit limited, they are better equipped to understand the interaction of tradition and change within a given sphere, and in doing so the spherical emphasis can be taught in such a way as to safeguard against what some historians see as an over-balance of a Western-oriented viewpoint. Most textbooks tend to incorporate regions of developing nations into later chapters whose main theme is often some aspect of Western imperialism and modernization-industrialization, thus easily creating at least the impression of an imbalance in perspective. Also, the earlier chapters of these texts that concentrated on regions that later became "developing nations" is far removed from where they later appear under the modernization theme. Thus, the student again loses the historical continuity and the fresh understanding of the influence of the past on

the present in the contemporary clash between tradition and change within a particular region. For example, I believe it is better for students to deal with the incursion of Western practices and ideals into the Orient in immediate conjunction with having studied earlier Oriental history rather than waiting a few chapters for the West to develop and *then* following Western ideas eastward. By then the continuity is broken and familiarity with the Oriental experience greatly reduced. The same is true with the other non-Western spheres.

My complaint with textbooks is not so much their emphasis as their structure. I find the overall emphasis on the Western-modernization theme found in most World Civ texts appropriate, although some may exaggerate this to the neglect of non-Western ideals and practices. I have noticed over the last few years, however, that most texts are being written with an increasing consciousness of the significance of the historical heritage of non-Western peoples and nations. In emphasizing the Western-modernization theme, I mean basically two things: 1) spending more time in each sphere with how the contemporary peoples are adapting to the modern world through the conflicts and syntheses of traditional culture with modern technology and political and socioeconomic ideas; and 2) giving the greatest attention of the survey to the West (about 40% to 50%) and presenting it last, thus underlining its importance. Since so many of the most influential ideas and technological innovations of the modern world can be traced to a Western origin, or have been most successfully developed in the West, the emphasis is not without great merit. Furthermore, it is important for students to know well their own cultural roots as they tackle the "enigmas and mysteries" of foreign cultures.

Practically speaking, the remaining percentage of the two-semester course is divided among the other five spheres with the Orient (China, Japan, and Viet Nam) receiving greater attention than the others. The survey concludes with a focus on the "globalization" of the modern world that attempts to take into account both the interdependency as well as the cultural diversity of the nations and peoples of the six spheres. Most texts have very well written concluding chapters that deal with the modern world in the context of its contemporary global challenges.

Even though it is demanding to organize a course using a text that follows a different structure, adaptation is not as difficult as it may seem. For each sphere I make out a study guide, which, among other things, lists as the reading assignment all the chapters and pages of the text that deal with peoples and cultures within that sphere from ancient to modern times. As already noted the later chapters of most texts integrate the modern centuries of world civilizations, especially third world countries, into a Western-modernization context. This means that the reading assignments for the six spheres will tend to overlap in the later chapters. For example, most texts present modern revolutions more or less as a unit, often treating the Russian, Mexican, and Chinese revolutions as different aspects of the same historical phenomenon, and modern India, China, and Japan within the context of Western imperialistic expansion. According to the division

of the reading assignments, these sections would be read as many as three different times because they represent three different spheres. This, I feel, is more helpful than distracting because a significant emphasis of the course is on the modern world, and it will be read within a particular spherical context. While most texts tend to lose the distinctive nature of world cultures in an effort to integrate them under the modernization theme, the spherical division has the advantage of concentrating on the perspective and historical experience of a particular sphere and its interaction with the modern world without necessarily losing sight of the growing interdependency of the world.

The study guide also includes three other items to make the reading more cohesive, emphasizing the ancient to modern scope and helping the student to concentrate on the main political, socioeconomic, religious, and cultural items: 1) a chronological table of the most prominent eras, events, and reigns; 2) a brief list of the most important people, events, and concepts; 3) a regional map(s) that also reflects the historical and cartographical changes. Since Western Civ receives the greatest emphasis, individual study guides are made for the common periodizations, such as Greece, Rome, Middle Ages, Renaissance/Reformation, and Enlightenment/Industrial Revolution. The carefully devised study guides, lectures, and directed class discussion expand and adapt the reading into a comprehensive and cohesive survey.

There is also an ever-increasing number of excellent audio-visual materials that can be used with great effectiveness. I try to have at least one audio-visual presentation for each sphere, multiple presentations for the Western Civ section and at least one for the course conclusion that deals with the theme of the globalization of the contemporary world. Although I am becoming more knowledgeable about what is available, I am far from being an expert in this area. I have drawn from local film libraries, PBS programs such as NOVA ("The Genius That Was China") and Smithsonian films ("Islam"), and commercial sources such as the numerous filmstrips and videos produced by Educational Audio Visuals. Presentation of the audio-visuals during class time is advantageous, but required outside-class viewing is also possible. There is also a growing number of useful computer materials.

Teaching the World Civ survey will always be difficult due to the breadth of the subject and the various conceptualizations of theme and structure, all of which have persuasive arguments. The spherical structure is simply one that I have found to be an effective approach for what I would like to emphasize in the course. As is true with all conceptualizations, there are a number of weaknesses, not the least of which is the fact that World Civ textbooks are not written in such a format, at least to my knowledge. This might or might not reflect the effectiveness of such an approach. There might have been attempts to publish material along these lines, only to be discontinued for various reasons. The common texts are easily adaptable to the spherical approach, although it would be better to have a text that is written with the spherical structure.