

THE "BIG PICTURE" MODEL FOR LEARNING WORLD HISTORY, OR SLIPPING BETWEEN THE ROCKS AND HARD PLACES

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Give me a place to stand and I will move the world, Archimedes reputedly boasted. All that the Greek scientist thought he needed to hoist this 6.6 billion, billion ton planet was a firm enough foundation. Many teachers probably think that they could teach world history effectively if they had enough time and space. But just as Archimedes never located that perfect foundation, so teachers have not gained the additional minutes or days they desire. An old line works here: Teachers are stuck between a rock and a hard place that keeps them from moving in new directions or even trying new ways of teaching.

Because world history is a fast growing subject in the history curriculum at all academic levels, we need more good ideas on how to teach this incredibly broad subject effectively. What if faculty approached the subject from a different, yet familiar angle? What if skills development drove the course instead of content delivery? The premise of the "Big Picture" model is to use skills development to teach content.

Of Rocks and Hard Places

The decision to organize instruction around skills was less an inspired idea than a desperate act. In twelve years of offering undergraduate world history survey courses and graduate methods classes on teaching history, I learned a major lesson: Few students have a background in world history—or geography. An unofficial survey of undergraduate students suggested that only one third had taken a world-related course in high school, be it history, civilizations, or geography.¹ Skills were also a problem. Different levels of students presented different challenges. The reading, cognitive, and writing skills of the undergraduates varied, thus requiring some attention, and the graduate students not only had to master content but also learn how to teach world history. So we started from scratch in several ways. After absorbing some hard knocks in the classroom, I decided that instruction had to integrate skills and content, with the former being paramount.

The "Big Picture" model was developed first for undergraduate world history courses. It proved remarkably successful, even in classes containing up to fifty students, most in their first year of college. It was later adapted to the graduate methods courses for pre-service teacher education students planning to teach high school history.

¹This survey was part of an opening class activity in which students filled out index cards answering various questions about themselves and their educational backgrounds. I have opened my classes with the index card activity for some ten years.

Although it needs some tinkering, the method is easily applied to secondary education as well.

Many teachers have faced similar situations. Part of the problem is that world history has changed dramatically over the last ten or fifteen years. Neither Western Civ nor a political chronicle of dates, events, and places involving white men passes for world history today. The trend is away from the traditional area studies format to a global perspective. According to Heidi Roupp, three approaches to world history predominate: a comparative study of civilizations, a thematic or topical approach to study human societies, and the chronological survey.² Ideally, instruction encompasses all the different peoples, places, and cultures that have ever lived together and apart on the seven continents, four oceans, and many more than seven seas of this 197 million square mile crusty planet. Accommodating space thus poses a vexing dilemma regarding who is included in instruction or left out of instruction and why.

Time creates different challenges. Human existence might amount to a paltry few minutes on scientist Carl Sagan's cosmic calendar, but teachers are still overwhelmed by the time frame of instruction. Most secondary school courses run a full academic year of approximately 36 weeks, five days a week for 40 to 50 minutes per day. In higher education, the courses typically run ten or fifteen weeks in a three-quarter or two-semester sequence. In either case, teachers have limited class time to cover a subject spanning anywhere from about 6000 to several million years.

Complicating matters, many schools are radically altering the character of instruction. Teachers are using more interactive exercises that directly involve students in the learning process, often stressing document-based activities. On the plus side, students prefer when teachers share knowledge rather than dictate it. Interaction also promotes learning content while building skills, but it eats up time voraciously in the classroom. The analysis of just one primary or secondary source document can stimulate a fruitful, insightful learning experience, but might consume an entire period.

Add to this mix the growing intrusion of standards and competency-based learning, along with the mania for standardized tests, and the question arises: What is a teacher to do? The expanding scope and scale of the content combined with the ongoing transformation of goals and methods has stimulated a strong debate on the future course of education. It has also pulled teachers in various and often conflicting directions, almost to the point of being educationally drawn and quartered. Though disagreements abound on what to cover and how to teach, on one point consensus does exist. The time and space constraints of world history courses have hardened.

²Heidi Roupp, editor, *Teaching World History: A Resource Book* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 3.

The "Big Picture" Model

Not a be-all and end-all solution to the numerous and disparate issues in education, the "Big Picture" model provides a cohesive, relatively simple procedure that promotes student learning of both content and skills. The name indicates its intent. Focus on overarching generalizations of global themes and topics distilled into a single explanatory sentence. Let the topic determine the scope of study rather than traditional political or other boundaries. This approach follows current thinking among some world historians. In *The New World History*, Ross Dunn suggests that "world history is the search for answers to questions about the past in which the inquiry embraces whatever geographical, social, or cultural field appropriate and in which conventionally defined entities such as nation-states are not allowed to limit the scope of investigation arbitrarily."³

My premise was that if students could end their study of a unit topic by writing a one-sentence hypothesis that explained the content, and if they could write an essay that defended or refuted that hypothesis, they probably had a good working knowledge and understanding of that unit's content. The intent was to place students in control of the learning process by giving them responsibility for making and justifying decisions. The ability to make reflective decisions and then support them effectively depended upon practicing essential skills grouped in three domains: thinking, working with others, and communicating. These domains encompassed a wide spectrum of literacy (and not just print, but map and visual, too), cognitive, collaborative teamwork, oral communication, and writing skills. But tutelage and practice were not abstract exercises. Both related directly to the mastering of content. In other words, students developed their skills through the study of world history. Or they learned world history by practicing skills. While the structure of daily lessons was dictated by skills, the organization of instruction was determined by historical content, a rather nice synergy.

Based upon experience, four guidelines served as the keys to success:

- Do not assume that students possess content knowledge or skills not in evidence;
- Do not skip steps;
- Keep things simple and basic; and
- Asking people to do something new requires practice, patience, and persistence as well as praise even for small accomplishments.

Following these guidelines enables students to manage the "Big Picture" model, building their knowledge and understanding of history and important skills in the process.

³Ross Dunn, editor, *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 6.

The goals of the "Big Picture" model are:

1. To improve student knowledge and understanding of world history;
2. To enable students to become independent, reflective thinkers;
3. To enable students to become effective communicators; and
4. To build history's habits of mind and methods among students.

In the process of meeting these goals, students proceed through six sequential steps, repeated in each unit:

1. Inquiry into primary sources to identify information and pose questions for further study.

This task involves reading for information and comprehension. Teachers can employ a variety of techniques, all of which involve supplying a framework for student reading. One option is for the teacher to place the document in context for students by posing abstract questions about the author, origins, and purpose, followed by content queries to identify topic, themes, main points, etc. Based upon the data they collect, students develop focused "who, what, when, how, where, and why" questions to guide their exploration of the unit topic. Typically, individual and/or small-group work leads to full-class discussion to report on and synthesize findings. The rule of thumb is a one-page print document per class period, though, in jigsaw fashion, groups can read and report on different documents.

2. Gathering information through examination of primary and secondary source documents.

Again, students individually or in groups construct lists, charts, or tables, culminating with class reportage and synthesis. The reading is done primarily as homework and then supplemented by additional resources in the classroom. But the discussion of the readings, including the construction of the lists, etc., is done in class so all students have the same base of information. It is also possible to insert simulation or role-play exercises in this stage to dramatize the historical process and highlight the human perspective.

3. Organizing information using lists and graphic organizers to select, categorize, and classify pertinent data.

This is a class activity, but it can be accomplished by small groups and then individual work, depending upon class and student mastery of the content and skills.

4. Synthesizing to construct the "Big Picture" statement or hypothesis as a class activity, using the Socratic Method to foster discussion.

The teacher should model this step in the first unit with minimal student interaction. Student involvement will increase naturally over the succeeding units. The

teacher can facilitate discussion by writing key points on the board. First, construct a master web or bubble chart of the major topics, themes, and points. Next, eliminate duplications and those items that can be categorized under others of more general nature until a short list of perhaps five to six major points is left. Students then can use this list as key words to craft their hypothesis in one sentence.

5. Assessing the hypothesis involves reviewing previous steps in reverse order and identifying support from general to specific facts.

Done as preparation for individual students to write the essay, the teacher might have to model this step for the class in the first unit.

6. Essay writing is an at-home task preferably done over a weekend to give students time to think, reflect, and develop their arguments.

Issues and Answers

Anytime something new and possibly different is tried, issues arise. This is particularly true in education where new ways of teaching and learning often require paving of the way to become accepted and effective. A basic rule of change is that if people do not find the change valuable and desirable, if they do not believe they can master it, they will resist it. Computer use or the lack thereof is a good example. In addition, the maxim of practice makes perfect comes into play, as does the problem of tedium. Few things can doom a new method quicker than cries of "boring!" Yet repetition is an integral part of practice.

With the "Big Picture" model, overcoming reluctance and resistance and averting the boring syndrome are tied to clear communication and careful, detailed, front-end planning. Teachers must let students know the value of the method in practical terms, assuring them that they can use the method in this and other classes to improve grades. I also tie the learning to developing essential job skills such as critical thinking, managing information, working collaboratively, and communicating effectively. If students know both what they are doing and why they are doing something, resistance lessens. For example, the construction of the master web that culminates with the development of the hypothesis is a tedious task consuming one or more class periods. However, anytime I commented on the tedium and asked students if they wanted to do this independently at home so we could move on to something more interesting, the class voted unanimously to construct the map. They realized its significance both as a learning exercise and as a pivotal step leading to the essay and ultimately their grade.

Another important point is to reassure students that instantaneous mastery is not expected, that they will not be left alone if they do not learn the content and skills quickly, and that you as teacher will work with them to achieve excellent results. Also note that grading will be on improvement, providing an incentive and not penalizing students for their performance while they are learning something new.

As is true with teaching and learning generally, long-term planning determines success. Planning here refers to constructing an efficient instructional framework compatible with the "Big Picture" model on two related levels. First, there is the organization of content into units and, second, there is the sequencing of the skills program by mastery.

Content is a sticky issue. As Dunn has noted, few think a world history course must cover everything. Instead, the issue is "how to build and then properly position a platform from which to expostulate human history in all its variety and confusion."⁴ The "Big Picture" model is specifically geared to making sense of the variety and confusion of human history. Following the strategy of overview and case study as well as the process of creating and defending the hypothesis helps to clarify content and thus leads to better comprehension.

What about meeting a "global" criterion, that is seeing that the whole world gets covered in a world history course? For the most part, neither daily lessons nor units can always accommodate content of true global dimensions, causing occasional frustration. Not every people, culture, or facet of history gets covered in each and every unit. However, by applying the criterion of "global" to the course, over the length of the course, they all can get some attention.

A second consideration is context. In many units, students should learn about the global dimensions of a topic. Using maps and timelines or chronologies, students get an overview of a topic to help place case studies into perspective. For example, in exploring the rise of agriculture, I use a map and chart that depicts its emergence and spread throughout the world. In this fashion, students gain appreciation for the magnitude and scope of the transformation stimulated by agricultural food production. Then our studies focus on the transition from hunting and gathering to farming in West Asia, the purported first instance of this shift. Similarly, a map depicting the spread of the Industrial Revolution over time and place helps students understand the worldwide dimensions and different stages of this phenomenon. Then they study selected examples, including Great Britain and a small number of other national experiences worldwide. In this sense, meeting the global criterion is more an opportunity than an obstacle, since it provides a broad context to the more specific content that comes in case studies.

The critical areas are the selection of topics and the length of the units. Both are influenced by the hypothesis culmination. Students must be able to explain the topic in one sentence and assess that explanation. The database of names, times, places, events, and such cannot be so massive that making sense of it overwhelms students. This consideration has less to do with the topic per se than with the number of examples and the materials introduced to explore those examples. My topics tend to be large and global, such as the initial rise of civilization, the axial age (Karl Jasper's term for the

⁴Ibid., 4.

period between approximately 700 BCE and CE 200 when many of the major schools of western and eastern thought and belief arose), the transoceanic encounter, and the democratic and industrial revolutions, among others. The case studies then bring the "Big Picture" into clearer focus by providing specific illustrations. For example, in studying the rise of the first civilizations, I emphasize river valleys where the earliest civilizations arose: the Tigris-Euphrates in West Asia, the Nile in North Africa, the Indus in South Asia, and sometimes the Wei in East Asia.

In addition, students need enough time to work with the information so they can construct a hypothesis. Unlike surveys where content generally is covered once in the classroom, the "Big Picture" requires students to examine information approximately six times, three times in the classroom and possibly three at home. In class, I introduce a topic to them. Then they analyze it to build a database. Next they go over the database to organize it and make sense of the unit. At home, students study the database to test the hypothesis and to identify examples to support the thesis of their essay. They then outline and finally write their essays. Working with the content several times in different ways facilitates learning and improves student knowledge and understanding while building skills, but it also consumes time. A good rule of thumb is that it takes approximately three days of 50-minute classes, or the equivalent, to introduce, revisit, and organize the information, construct the hypothesis, and prepare for the essay.

The length and organization of units, then, is largely determined by what is needed to complete activities successfully and by the student learning curve. Most units run from two to four weeks depending upon the topic. For units longer than two weeks, the last day of each week might be devoted to summarizing the content covered that week by constructing graphic organizers in the form of charts, table, webs, etc. This review provides practice with managing information and also facilitates putting everything together during the last week when the hypothesis is constructed.

To begin the course and introduce the method, a one-week orientation unit helps acquaint students to the model and its various steps. My introductory unit on the shift from hunting-gathering to farming is a pivotal topic but is very narrowly defined and explored using a handful of pertinent primary and secondary source documents that pertain to North Africa and West Asia.⁵

⁵The one-week duration of the introductory unit requires using a small number of print, map, and visual primary and secondary documents. The primary sources used to open the unit are an Egyptian wall painting from the late fifteenth century BCE that depicts a harvest from Dennis Sherman and others, *World Civilizations: Sources, Images, and Interpretations*, second edition, volume 1 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), 19, and a rock painting interpreted as people harvesting rain from Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield (eds.), *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, second edition, volume I: *To 1700* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 51. Students analyze these graphic images primarily to identify what the people are doing, to judge how the methods of farming have changed over time, and to

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Another concern is flow of content. Because world history is so disparate and chaotic, its study needs structure and connections. Unit topics work best when they relate to each other. A good ploy is to develop a large course title to use as the central theme. In constructing the course theme and unit topics, use short phrases that contain neutral, abstract language. Avoid wording that might bias students towards a predefined hypothesis, a foregone conclusion that works against developing cognitive skills.

For example, World Civilizations II (the second quarter of a three-quarter sequence) studied world history from 1500 CE to World War I. The course theme was that the transoceanic encounter initiated by Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries set in motion forces that stimulated an age of revolutions that continues to transform the world. The theme does not characterize the natures of the encounter, the revolutions, or the transformation. The unit titles were the meeting of cultures, the democratic revolution, the development of the industrial revolution, and implications of the industrial age. Though cause and effect is evident in the course theme and topics are identified, the wording does not provide clues to the eventual hypothesis that will explain the content of the units. If clash, conflict, or conquest had been used in the theme or units, the connotation would have been very different and the student hypothesis would have been strongly influenced by such descriptions. For example, the unit title "meeting of cultures" offers a much different impression than does "clash of cultures."

The second consideration is skills mastery. Here, the context differs somewhat from traditional frameworks as the sequencing focuses on independence tied to performance, rather than building from lower to higher-level skills. Due to class and individual learning curves, it is impossible to prepare a timetable of mastery achievement prior to the course. After all, students ascend Bloom's cognitive taxonomy in each and every unit, a difficult task to master in one year or semester.

A good way to gain insight into student skill levels is to use the orientation topic to diagnose ability to perform the various tasks. Teachers might even survey students, having them evaluate their own skills competencies. It is important to remember that

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estimate how farming changed the lives and cultures of peoples adopting it. The two images exhibit vastly contrasting styles and content. The Egyptian image is a complex series of realistic, detailed images, while the rock painting is a much simpler, bare-bones depiction. In addition to a map showing the origins and spread of agriculture, I use the following short secondary readings in the introduction unit: Elise Boulding, "Women and the Agricultural Revolution," in Kevin Reilly (ed.), *Readings in World Civilizations, Volume I: The Great Traditions*, third edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 21-25, and Robert J. Braidwood, "The Agricultural Revolution," in Sherman, *World Civilizations*, 24-26. In some classes, students read the section on the rise of agriculture in Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1991), 37-55.

confidence influences competence and many students are extremely insecure about their abilities. The results from the first unit will help in planning others.

The schedule of activities facilitates learning because it provides a routine repeated enough times that students become familiar and comfortable with it. Equally important, the routine is flexible and variable, leading to results that directly affect student grades, so tedium is less of an issue. As they move through the process and gain both confidence and competence, students will let the teacher know when they believe they can go through the steps with minor aid or just with the teacher writing on the board.

Unfortunately, mastery is a two-edged sword. The class likely will show good progress and mastery due to the collective nature of performing the tasks. Individually, almost all students will quickly know what to do and understand the process. They will also recognize the value of the method. But knowing what to do is different from knowing how to do it well. Individual student mastery is a mystery that cannot be slotted. Some students will learn the method rapidly. Others will learn parts. Still others might experience difficulties throughout the entire course and require frequent help. And some students who had trouble throughout the course might return later to report that they used the method in another class with good results.

Another issue is materials. Students construct their hypothesis from a database comprised of a diverse body of information from a variety of authorities—not just a textbook. The "Big Picture" model stresses document-based learning. For our purposes "document" refers to focused primary and secondary sources in full or excerpted versions. They are the core materials.

The document basis raises questions about access and use of these resources as well as the role of the textbook. Access to sources is not the problem it was in the past. A wide range of readers is readily available. Some contain primary sources, some secondary articles, and some mix the two.⁶ In addition, textbook packages usually come with an array of ancillaries that include maps, primary source documents, media in some cases, and so on. Lastly, the Internet is a virtual treasure-trove of documents. Yes, it takes some work to access materials, but the effort is not overwhelming and often proves rewarding. Another point is that access is generally a one-time task that conceivably can be put on students as research, especially as technology training in using the Internet.

The length of the unit and the class period necessitates that the sources be brief and to the point. In many cases, editing is necessary for materials used in the classroom. Reading and discussion in class can be incredibly time-consuming, yet these are the most effective means for making certain that the pertinent information about each document is identified and interpreted. Also, by having a document focus on one point, students can easily grasp the content and meaning, as well as develop reading

⁶Sherman, *World Civilizations*, is an excellent reader.

skills. Using several focused documents allows for a number of perspectives to be identified and discussed in one class. Every student does not necessarily read the same document. In the jigsaw format, groups can read several documents and then report findings to other class members. Even though focus questions should be provided for each outside reading assignment, the in-class analysis of sources also helps students know what to look for in the readings done as homework.

For example, to begin inquiry into the development of the Industrial Revolution, I generally pass out four or five documents. Students receive guidelines or questions to help them identify the context (author, title, date, etc.) and content (topic, main points, etc.) of the document they are assigned. In small groups, each group working with a different document, students compare notes and summarize findings that are then recorded on the board. Using the notes on the board, students pose questions to pursue further their study of the Industrial Revolution.

The last point concerns a staple of history instruction—the textbook. In the “Big Picture” model, a textbook is not essential. When it is used, the text plays a secondary role as a reference work. There might be scattered reading of pertinent sections, but generally students employ the textbook as an encyclopedia to look up specific points. Thus, the textbook provides a time-and-space overview and, if they are of high quality, a good collection of maps and timelines or chronologies.

And in the end

Actually, there is no end to education. Despite all the fuss and bother about outcomes in education, teaching is more about means than ends. The best “outcome” is to have students realize that they are always in the process of becoming educated and that learning is not confined to school, but spans their entire existence. The “Big Picture” model is about means, about learning a method to achieve understanding. It also recognizes that learning is process-oriented and continues far beyond the confines of a single class. Learning is becoming.

The notion of “becoming” is especially applicable to the teaching of world history. Currently, it is in flux and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. No consensus exists on how to conceptualize it for the classroom.⁷ The continuing evolution of world history reflects an undeniable fact of education and life—change is the normal state of affairs. And change creates two opportunities. We can whine about another fine educational mess or we can innovate to meet the new conditions. “The Big Picture” model seeks the innovators.

⁷Dunn, *The New World History*, 4.

The "Big Picture" Model Activity-Skills Set

Inquiry into Primary Sources

Examining documents as texts, planning inquiry:

Reading for knowledge, note-taking, working collaboratively, organizing data into lists, summarizing data, posing questions

Information Gathering

Examining documents as texts:

Reading for knowledge, comprehension, note-taking, working collaboratively, organizing data into lists, summarizing data, posing questions

Organizing Information

Managing information to create organized data base:

Data analysis, evaluation, categorization, prioritization, creating graphic organizers, working collaboratively

Synthesis

Developing a hypothesis:

Generalizing data, synthesizing information, working collaboratively, writing for understanding

Hypothesis Assessment

Testing the hypothesis:

Reading for comprehension, data analysis and evaluation

Essay Writing

Writing an analytical essay:

Reading for comprehension, selecting, prioritizing, organizing data, outlining, writing, editing

**The "Big Picture" Method:
document-based inquiry learning to manage and make sense of content**

