Forum: Training Teachers of World History

A Most Pressing Challenge: Preparing Teachers of World History

By Robert Bain and Lauren McArthur Harris

Editor's Note: The editorial board decided that the arguments advanced by the authors of the following essay were important enough to warrant a thorough and comprehensive debate of the various issues involved in a forum. The board commissioned, therefore, three more articles to critique the essay by Bain and Harris and discuss the questions posed by them, and in the process, present their own views on the proper preparation of teachers of world history. We invite readers also to offer their own comments in the form of letters to the editor (which may be addressed to perspectives@historians.org).

Preparing skilled and knowledgeable world history teachers has become history's most pressing educational challenge. Though typically unacknowledged by the public, politicians, or the profession, the problems involved in filling our classrooms with well-prepared teachers of world history are analogous, if not equivalent, to the challenges of filling classrooms with qualified math and science teachers. This essay briefly explores why this is so pressing a need, and how we might begin to meet the challenge.

World History Education: Supply and Demand Issues

There is a supply and demand problem regarding world history teachers. World history is the fastest-growing subject in the social studies if not in the entire school curriculum, and its growth over the past 20 years has been remarkable. Over three-quarters of all high school students earned world history credits in 2005 as the subject has more than doubled in popularity since 1982. All state standards include world history in some form and about 60 percent of the states require it for graduation. The College Board first offered the Advanced Placement (AP) World History exam in 2001 and has seen a steady increase in students every year. The over 124,000 test-takers in 2008 made world history the seventh most popular AP test. Additionally, the federal government is considering adding world history to its National Assessment for Educational Progress exams. In short, a consensus has formed about the value of world history in the education of American students. State legislatures, local school districts, parents, and students have made it almost co-equal to U.S. history in popularity. World history's champions must be pleased with this growth.

However, the supply of teachers has not kept pace with demand. Few teachers have had any formal world historical training—a perilous situation caused by out-of-field teaching and thin certification requirements. Professional development opportunities are sparse. College-level world history has lagged behind the precocious graduate growth, and there are comparatively few world history resources for teachers or teacher educators. Unfortunately, there are no national programs—like those we have for American history—to raise teachers' knowledge of world history.

Thus, the absence of well-prepared world history teachers undermines the increasing presence of world history in the schools. However, simply increasing the number of world history teachers may not meet the "coherence" problem facing both teachers and students of world history.

The Coherence Problem in World History

World history is perhaps the most difficult course for history teachers to organize, plan, and then teach. Of course, developing coherent history courses at any scale, whether regional, national, or local, is a challenge. However, our research with teachers and in classrooms has led us to think that the problems are more acute in world history. Why?

First, there is great variation in the ways states, standards, textbooks, and teachers present world history. The main approaches to the subject vary greatly in regard to periodization schemes, significance, units of
analysis, and the temporal-spatial scales used to frame the history of the world. Thus, although world history as such is ubiquitous in the school curriculum, its nature and content differs greatly from state to state, school to school, and textbook to textbook.

Not surprisingly, teachers' ideas of the content to be included in world history courses also vary. Most try to fit more "stuff" into a world history course than they do for courses with a national or regional scope. Our research suggests that teachers of world history often lack proper criteria for determining what, from among all that "stuff," they should include. For example, we often begin professional development workshops by asking world history teachers to create a five-minute history of the United States, Europe, and then the world. The teachers typically get right to work on U.S. history, creating a story of development involving familiar events such as European settlement and colonization, the war for independence, the Civil War, the world wars, civil rights, and more recent events. Likewise, they craft a familiar and clear story of Europe rising from river valleys through classical civilizations, through the Middle Ages and on to today. Most history teachers seem to have useful "big pictures" of the history of the United States and of the West, and they use these pictures to narrate change over time and locate details within a larger frame.

However, such is not the case when teachers turn to offer a history of the world. They struggle over where to begin the story, what to include, how to incorporate the stories of different regions, what constitutes the major turning points, and typically confess a lack of knowledge for certain eras or regions of the world. The result? Compared to what they created in U.S. or western history, their history of the world is in pieces.

Now, this is not a cry for creating a grand narrative in world history, but rather a reminder of the instructional importance of having a "big picture" to help situate all the details that so define history at any level. If teachers cannot make the necessary temporal and spatial connections, it is difficult to imagine that they will be able to help their students make these links.

In a recent study of 10 world history teachers (veteran as well as prospective), Harris found discernable differences in how the teachers built meaningful connections between world historical events for themselves and for their students. She asked teachers to develop connections and interrelationships between a seemingly random stack of historical events and concepts—such as the Atlantic Slave Trade, Bantu Migrations, the Renaissance, and the Cold War. The teachers created concept maps—on note cards—by drawing connections between events and categories to group events, and they "talked-aloud" about their decisions. Teachers first sorted the cards to capture their own understanding and then thought about how they might structure these for students.

The differences were stark. Some developed multiple connections, showing a fluid and rich understanding of the events, whereas others simply placed them in chronological order or according to "themes," such as economics. Variation among participants was not necessarily related to number of years teaching world history or to courses taken as one might have expected. Instead it appeared that participation in a curriculum and professional development program—such as the AP program—specifically focused on teaching and learning world history on a global scale may have better prepared these experienced world history teachers to create coherent organizational schemes both for themselves and for instructional purposes. Those without this experience may have approached the task from within a more familiar nation-state or civilizational form, thus facing challenges in organizing events spanning large amounts of time and space. Harris found that teachers were better equipped to make connections across historical events if they had both knowledge of the events and an understanding of how to make crosscultural or causal connections over hundreds or even thousands of years. Certainly historical content knowledge mattered in this task, but it alone was not sufficient to create meaning across diverse events.

**Meeting the Challenges**

So what does this mean for historians and those charged with preparing teachers to teach history? At the outset we must recognize the critical need to prepare the next generation of teachers, and work both to increase and improve our efforts in world history teacher education.

Can we expect Congress to take up this challenge just as it did through the Teaching American History (TAH) grant program? The motivation for the TAH program, according to its chief officer, Alex Stein, was to "reverse [three] limitations in history education": (1) the weak position of history in elementary and secondary history curriculums; (2) the lack of content knowledge and poor content preparation among too many history teachers; and (3) poor student performance on history assessments. To reverse these deficits, Stein asserted, the TAH grant program offered a "bold new idea" by delivering "history content . . . directly to United States history teachers through ongoing partnerships with providers of history expertise."

We think that world history teachers also need such "bold new ideas." One immediate way to draw attention to the problem and to begin to meet the challenges would be for Congress to expand the TAH program to include world history—turning it into the Teaching American and/or World History grant program.
However, it is dangerous to depend upon or wait for Congress to pass legislation to improve history education, while ignoring the opportunities that historians, history teachers, and their professional associations currently have to shape and define history education policy. What, then, might history departments and history educators do now to meet the challenges of world history education?

For one thing, teachers need more course work in world history. We join with others in the profession who urge teachers of secondary history to have majored in history, but wonder if we should further insist that at least half of the course work includes world history. Or at the very least, require the equivalent of AP world history knowledge for all teachers of K–12 history.

However, course work is just a proxy for what teachers need to know. Our research indicates that the quantity of knowledge in world history—while necessary—does not seem to be sufficient. Indeed, many teachers with whom we work know details about the events of world history, but are not able to fit the pieces together or make them cohere around intellectual problems or big questions to drive inquiry. Too often, world history is, in the minds of teachers and students, a fragmented study of civilizations and nation-states, with little attention to interconnections except for an occasional comparison to emphasize political and cultural differences.

Second, teacher preparation programs, both for prospective and practicing teachers, must help world history teachers understand challenges students face when learning history across such temporal and spatial scales while also helping teachers develop meaningful links between global history and stories occurring on more familiar historical scales. In short, teacher education in world history should focus on helping teachers understand the relationships between macro- and micro-explanations of historical change, make formal comparisons, consider relationships between structure and culture, and understand what it takes to pursue historical questions at different temporal-spatial scales.

Thus, world history teachers need to consider different temporal-spatial “containers” or lenses they would use to help their students to view history at different scales. For example, in a recent study we conducted of the effect on teachers’ use of a global history curriculum, we found that developing a conceptual frame large enough for other stories to come into focus was a critical step in designing coherent instruction.9

Ironically, TAH as currently structured offers a wonderful vehicle to situate American history within different temporal-spatial containers and look at it with lenses of varying focal length. “Globalizing” familiar stories in American history makes sense and fits with current trends in the profession as typified by the La Pietra report, in work by Tom Bender and Carl Guarneri, and the 2009 AHA annual meeting theme “globalizing historiography.”10 In keeping with the spirit and letter of TAH legislation, globalizing U.S. history would expand teachers’ knowledge of U.S. history by helping them to locate the distinctive and the common, while having an added benefit of expanding teachers’ knowledge of the world outside the United States. Even a quick read of Bender or Guarneri’s work reveals such dual value. Of course, such an effort would require an increased collaboration of world historians with U.S. and other regional/national historians to exchange historical expertise. But we also need to keep in mind that knowledge of world history—even coherent knowledge—is not enough to improve the quality of teaching. Beyond setting the national story in global context, we need to help teachers set history within the instructional context—that means in real classrooms, with real students, using real materials, standards, texts, curriculum and assessments, and paying attention to real time demands. Teacher education for world history must help teachers place things not only in global time and space, but also in instructional time and space.

However, a crucial question remains: What knowledge of world history is most valuable for teachers of world history? To answer, we need more research and collaboration between world historians and scholars of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In 2004, Senator Robert Byrd explained to readers of Perspectives his abiding interest in history and why he has been arguably history education’s strongest political advocate:

Chesterton put it far more eloquently and succinctly than I when he wrote: The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living.11

The Center for Historical Research
at
The Ohio State University

We are pleased to announce the fall and winter seminar schedule for the 2009–10 academic program, “The Intersection of Diaspora, Immigration, and Gender in World History.”


Nov. 13. Michael Kulikowski, University of Tennessee, “Post-Roman, Postcolonial: Postcolonial and Diaspora Theory in Late Roman and Early Medieval History.”

Nov. 20. Scott Levi, The Ohio State University, “Hindus Beyond the Hindu Kush: The Indian Communities in Central Asia and Beyond.”

Dec. 4. Sandra Greene, Cornell University, “To Stay or Go: The Gendered Decisions of the Formerly Enslaved of West Africa after the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade.”

Seminars are held from 3:30 to 5:30 pm. Please consult our web site, http://chr.osu.edu/, or contact the center at osuchr@osu.edu for further information. All are welcome.
If, however, the historical hill is not sufficiently high enough to allow us to see beyond our nation’s borders, then it fails to meet the Chesterton criterion. Consequently our citizens are denied the chance to properly see the nation in which they live or the age in which they are living. Coherent and comprehensive world history teacher preparation is a critical feature in extending our horizons of vision beyond the nation’s borders. It is the history profession’s most pressing educational need.

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Notes
3. Out-of-field teaching occurs when teachers teach without either a major or minor in the content they teach. While this affects all subject areas, history and the social studies are impacted more than other content areas. About 60 percent of students in history courses have teachers who have not majored or minored in history—any history, let alone world history. See Richard Ingersoll, “The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools,” Educational Researcher 28:2 (1999), 26–37.
5. The Teaching American History Grant Program provides professional development for teachers of U.S. history. To date, the U.S. Congress has made almost $1 billion available to deepen teachers’ content knowledge of U.S. history. There is nothing like this in world history.
6. For example, Bain and Shreiner’s review of state standards revealed four distinct patterns for what states term world history: what they called Western Civilization Plus, Social Studies World History, Regional History, and Global World History. They argue that a Western Civilization Plus pattern follows the story of Western Civilization at times adding regions beyond Europe without dramatically changing key events or the underlying narrative. The Social Studies pattern aligns with the National Council for the Social Studies’ curriculum standards by including world history as one strand among many in a curriculum. Thus, in the Social Studies pattern world history content is often lost at the expense of broader interdisciplinary themes. In the regional pattern, standards treat one or more region of the world separately without necessarily making connections between them—for example courses or units on Africa, Western Civilization, or Asia. The Global World History pattern most reflects the scholarly field of world history by focusing on large interregional and global patterns across time and space. The AP world history course is the best example of this approach to secondary world history. See Robert B. Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, “Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History,” The History Teacher 38:2 (2005).
9. See the World History for Us All web site at http://worldhistoryforusall.sdus.edu for a good, developing model of a global history program.

Eugene Asher Award for Distinguished Teaching

Established in 1986, the Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award recognizes outstanding teaching and advocacy for history teaching at two-year, four-year, and graduate colleges and universities. The award is named for the late Eugene Asher, for many years a leading advocate for history teaching. The Society for History Education shares the AHA the sponsorship of the award.

The award is intended for inspiring teachers whose techniques and mastery of subject matter made a real difference to students of history. Nominations of mentors or teaching colleagues are appropriate. An individual may not nominate his or her thesis adviser (current or within the past five years). At the time of nomination, a nominee must still be alive but may be retired or emeritus. Each letter of nomination must include the address (home & work) of the nominee.

Letters of nomination (no more than two pages each) should be submitted to the AHA. The prize committee will select a short list of finalists, each of whom will be asked to provide (electronically) five copies of a short c.v. and a syllabus (or syllabi) and a teaching statement to a total of 15 pages or less. The recipient will be invited to attend the award presentation at the 2011 annual meeting in Boston and will receive a $1,000 award.

The letter of nomination must be postmarked by April 15, 2010. Only the letter of nomination should be mailed (no faxes, please) to:

Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award, American Historical Association
400 A Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003-3889

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Teaching Teachers of World History

By Sharon Cohen

The Challenges of Gaining Expertise in Teaching World History

When experienced history teachers show up in my world history workshops or institutes, their lack of confidence about teaching the course is palpable. They ask repeatedly for a complete syllabus, every lesson plan, and even to visit the classroom of an experienced world history teacher. World history seems like an impossible course to those who are accustomed to teaching with some kind of overarching narrative. They worry about “covering” all of the content and seek many examples of how to teach thematically with case studies. They begin to get the global scope only when they see relevant quizzes and tests and realize that they do not have to require their students to learn about every event for the last 10,000 years on the planet. It is only then that they start to accept the feasibility of teaching world history.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia, expertness is a state that most of us cannot achieve easily. We get accustomed to a certain level of competence and stop seeking challenges that require a higher level of problem solving. When confronted with teaching world history for the first time experienced teachers have to acquire new habits of thinking about history. Expert world history teachers can show them how to construct a syllabus with lessons and assessments that demonstrate a global perspective. I have observed over and over again that once experienced teachers new to world history gain confidence about the global approach, they can be more creative about choosing case studies to demonstrate global historical patterns and processes to their students.

Honorary Foreign Membership in the AHA

Nominations Invited

AHA members are invited to nominate distinguished foreign historians for the 2010 award. Since 1885, when the AHA honored Leopold von Ranke with its first testimonial of honorary membership, the Association has so honored 89 foreign scholars.

According to the selection criteria, recipients of honorary memberships must be foreign scholars (1) who are distinguished for their work in the field of history and (2) who have markedly assisted the work of American historians in the scholar’s country. Persons not holding an academic position can also be nominated.

The AHA Council encourages nominations that address the need for broader geographic coverage: in recent years most nominations and honorees have been from western Europe. The Committee on Honorary Foreign Members and Awards for Scholarly Distinction will serve as the jury and will recommend an individual for approval by the Council. The committee consists of the president, president-elect, and the immediate president.

A complete nomination should include (1) a letter of nomination that contains specific details addressing the criteria listed above, (2) a two-page c.v. of the nominee with a summary of major publications, and (3) a minimum of two supporting letters of recommendation. The package should not exceed 20 pages.

Please send all materials to: Committee on Honorary Foreign Members, AHA, 400 A St., SE, Washington, DC 20003-3889
The Role of Textbooks and Standardized Testing in World History Teaching

I also think that the failure of textbook authors to include clear models of explaining global patterns and processes confuses teachers who rely on textbooks for their own conceptual map of world history. Until recently, even the world history textbooks created for the collegiate and Advanced Placement markets often presented more of a regional rather than an integrated, global approach. It is easy to see how teachers new to world history who design their unit plans around a world history textbook could become confused about what world history is. They might not see what Eric Martin has identified as the essence of doing world history: "thinking about several different historical variables (such as multiple places) at once, using relationships and connections as units of analysis, breaking down complex processes into interrelated component parts, connecting the local to the global and vice versa, and developing new categories and models of analysis." He also recognizes that teachers new to world history need a "conceptual tool box customized for building answers to complex global questions." The teacher who is asked to teach world history for the first time confronts these multiple levels of complexity. It is up to the expert world history teachers to demonstrate and share their successful toolkits so that the novice world history teacher can start from a place of confidence rather than confusion.

While many of us may cringe from the idea that secondary school teachers have to teach to a test whether it is an Advanced Placement or state assessment examination, it is a reality that most novice world history teachers face. The experienced teacher of American or European history understandably might have found success with emphasis on key terms and facts for their students to memorize for the national or state test. When I and other teachers of new world history teachers share syllabi and assessments that have led students to success on the relevant tests, the confidence level of the teacher-participants understandably rises dramatically.

Conclusion

Creativity and the willingness to attack the problem of choosing apt case studies for identifying patterns and processes in world history are two essential attributes of world history teachers; but novice world history teachers cannot be creative and willing to make choices if they are not sure of the direction they need to go. Lacking their own classroom experiences with world history, they often feel uneasy about solving the problem of what they should select as case studies for the larger global processes their students need to analyze. Teachers new to world history need many models and examples from expert world history teachers before they will be ready to be innovators. The conceptual basis of world history seems so different to these novice world history teachers that lots of reassurance and generosity are needed. We who train teachers of world history should see this big picture of the fears that novice world history teachers face, and offer them guidance through our successful syllabi, conceptual approaches, and direct instruction in what is important to focus on in a world history course. With more active support from their more experienced colleagues, these less-than-confident teachers quickly will become the expert world history instructors we want all students to encounter.

Sharon Cohen teaches Advanced Placement world history and International Baccalaureate history at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, Maryland. Since 2000, she has organized more than 40 workshops and summer institutes on teaching world history in the United States, Canada, Morocco, and France. She is a frequent presenter at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association and the World History Association. She wrote the College Board’s current Teacher’s Guide for AP World History, edited the College Board publication, Special Focus on Teaching About Latin America and Africa in the Twentieth Century (2007), and has several articles published in the online journal World History Connected.

Notes

6. Ibid.
Forum: Training Teachers of World History

Getting the Big Picture: Teaching World History Teachers

By Peter N. Stearns

Reading the article by Bain and Harris was a stimulating experience. I appreciated the new and compelling data about the growth of the world history field and the resulting need for teachers with more training than most are now getting. Framing this as the most pressing challenge in the history education field makes good sense. I confess I don’t see the federal government stepping in with Teaching World History grants (though the idea of adding a global component to the TAH program would be eminently justified and might just sneak under the radar), but one can always hope. The need to stimulate college history departments to do more to provide future world history teachers with relevant experience is truly pressing, and we have been shamefully remiss in not stepping up sooner. As the article suggests, the “do more” involves, in the first place, establishing more uniformly a good survey course in world history; but it also means going beyond, to offer some definable advanced world history courses so that the introductory offering is not the only entrant. Thinking of world history at the college level in terms of a brief but defined curricular sequence is both pressing and achievable, to help meet the need not only to train more future teachers but to provide them with the kind of depth that, as Bain and Harris suggest, moves beyond initial exposure.

The jumble of state standards involves another problem that needs to be faced candidly. The growth of world history courses is impressive and—properly handled—truly welcome, but let’s be frank: many of them aren’t real world history courses, but rather mishmashes of “the West and the rest” (or as Bain and Harris put it, Western civilization plus). I know this is a debatable evaluation, but I think it explains part of the complications that Bain and Harris rightly point to. Lots of high school courses, and some college offerings, have simply not made a full transition from Western civ to world history, though they eagerly embrace the latter label. This places teachers—many of whom have Western civ experience and, sometimes, deep commitments to making sure that many familiar Western staples are conveyed—in a serious dilemma. It makes it hard for them to sort out what to leave out of the Western record in order simply to make room for other materials. It almost guarantees a coherence problem when world developments don’t fit neatly into a Western mold. There is a need, therefore, to continue working with curriculum officials to make sure that world history courses can be framed in terms of a world history conceptualization. We’re not there yet.

2010-2011 Fellowship in Aerospace History

Supported by the National Aeronautics & Space Administration (NASA)

The American Historical Association will annually fund at least one Fellow, for one academic year, to undertake a research project related to aerospace history. It will provide a Fellow with an opportunity to engage in significant and sustained advanced research in all aspects of the history of aerospace from the earliest human interest in flight to the present, including cultural and intellectual history, economic history, history of law and public policy, and the history of science, engineering, and management.

Applicants must possess a doctorate degree in history or in a closely related field, or be enrolled as a student (having completed all coursework) in a doctoral degree-granting program.

Applications & letters of recommendation must be postmarked by March 1, 2010. Names of the winner and alternate will be announced in May 2010.

Details about the fellowship program and the application process, as well as a list of past fellowship projects are at www.historians.org/prizes/NASA.htm.
This specific issue, not easily in historians’ control in an American society that is still more than a bit ambivalent about truly global education, bleeds into the problem of finding coherence even in courses that are reasonably framed. Here, where things ought to be manageable, we still have some work to do—but it is work that can be done. Bain and Harris rightly note the tendency to seek to put too much “stuff” in the world history courses, often in part a residue of the Western civ experience and a resultant sense that we should do for other societies and nations what we used to be able to do for Britain or France in Western civ, with all the loving detail.

But it’s not just novice teachers that cause the problem here. Almost everyone involved in the world history enterprise seems bent on trying to put too much in. Textbooks are too big, often trying to do too much with individual societies. When historians had a shot at defining standards back in the 1990s, with the abortive National Standards movement, they created criteria that covered 314 pages—and these were just main subject headings (in contrast, geographers managed to produce a 60-page guidebook for their discipline). Admittedly, historians did the same thing for U.S. history, even a bit more, but as Bain and Harris point out the problem of “stuff” is less problematic in U.S. history because we have more experience in handling it. Even the Advanced Placement program in world history, initially bent on making sure world history was as manageable as possible, seems to be falling victim to the “put-more-in” syndrome, as its stipulations become increasingly detailed and complex. Understandably, the temptation is very difficult to control. We used to think, for example, that we could cheat a bit, by largely leaving Persia out, but now not only the purists but also the demands of the contemporary world require that this be rethought, so that we have some historical perspective on Iranian society. But those of us who put Persia in have not usually figured out what to take out. The escalation continues.

Granting all this, everyone in the world history game needs periodically to step back, take a deep breath, and remember the injunctions of one of the founders of the teaching field, Lefton Stavrianos, who said that the first thing to do in entering world history was: DARE TO OMIT. Historians involved in instruction at the college level—framing courses and maybe even contributing to textbooks—need to take a lead in helping to winnow out, to prevent world history from becoming a growing and unwieldy catalogue of facts; and we need to listen to experienced world history teachers who have figured some of this out on their own. We are, sometimes, our own worst enemies in disciplinary manageability.

What is particularly striking about the Bain and Harris study is their finding that mere experience in teaching world history, at least amid the demands of high school engagement, does not necessarily help to develop and sustain coherence—but that exposure to structure does advance the cause. This means that those of us who teach existing or upcoming teachers need to keep this charge very much in mind.

And this means, in turn, that we must not only help teachers decide how to dare omissions, but also that we need, more vigorously than we sometimes imagine necessary, to emphasize the basics, the big picture, far more than we need to display our dazzling specialist knowledge of this or that regional case or particular topic.

Here I would add to the Bain and Harris statement about the substantial coherence world history seeks, the extent to which, in defining world history periodization, substantial coherence has in fact been established. I agree of course that all sorts of world history frameworks exist, that debate undoubtedly extends to fundamentals, and that no single formula has been or should be projected. The fact remains that a lot of world historians have agreed not only on what a number of key periods in world history are, but through what major themes they can be defined. And the themes, in turn, are not usually either too numerous or too complex. My favorite example, because it involved a personal intellectual trajectory that began in complete inexperience, involves the period 600–1450 CE (sometimes, admittedly, divided in two, around 1000 CE, but that’s a detail that need not delay us here). On my first world history project—a collaborative high school text—we all agreed to call this period “the age of diversity” because, amid the increasing number and variety of societies we had to deal with (after the comforting simplicity of three to five cases in the previous, classical period) it looked like the only recourse was to pick them off, one by one, because there were no crosscutting themes. It turns out—and I think there’s substantial agreement on this—that a first take on the period actually involves merely two primary, and very clear, themes, to which all the societies of Afro-Eurasia had to respond in some fashion: the spread of world religions and the increase in transregional trade and contact. One can go on to add a larger number of patterns, like the unusual importance of Islam or the rise of explicit efforts at neighboring imitations, but they in fact derive from the two basics. Amid everything that happened, the fundamentals—both involving substantial and enduring change—are strikingly clear. This is precisely the kind of back-to-basics discovery that can be shared with teachers, with teachers’ own experience in translating to the classroom adding to the message, so that we start more clearly with the conceptual forest, rather than the trees of detail. This is where the kind of collaboration that Bain and Harris recommend—among teachers of various levels, among world historians, and scholars of teaching and learning—can usefully center.

Admittedly, the conceptualization of world history is not always as clear cut as what (in my view) we can suggest for the postclassical centuries. The hardest period to conceptualize is, or should be, our own age, where by definition, since we don’t yet know the end of the story, the identification of fundamental themes is going to be most complex and most open to debate. It’s here, as well, that we risk being particularly distracted by conventional sub-periods, like the world wars or cold war decades, which can easily trample any larger scope or vision. Even here, however, coherence, if by definition somewhat tentative, is not impossible to uncover, and working with teachers on defining the fundamentals can be particularly rewarding.

The key, always, is first to identify the big changes—the small number of really big, crosscutting changes—that divide one major world history time period from another. This done, one can turn to concomitant continuities, subdivisions of change, regional variations—but with a sense of the larger picture firmly in mind. World history teaching is hard, but it can also be thoughtful and organized. As we work on this vital teaching challenge, there are many strengths to share.

Peter Stearns is professor of history at George Mason University, where he is also the provost and executive vice president for academic affairs. He is the author, coauthor, or editor of numerous books and encyclopedias, many of which are on world history.
We live in a Global Economy
—One of 150,000 lessons listed on Lesson Planet, A Search Engine for Teachers

The World is Flat
—Thomas Friedman

Arguing against globalization is like arguing against the laws of gravity
—Kofi Annan

As Americans, we need to pay more attention to the world around us—your school’s world history teacher

These statements reflect an imperative to survive in a changing world by learning more about its history and cultures. The rapid growth in the popularity of the College Board’s Advanced Placement course in world history speaks to a consensus on the importance of knowing about a world beyond the borders of the United States. In its first seven years, the AP world history examination has become the seventh most popular AP test.

Despite the growing popularity of high school world history, particularly beyond the survey course level, it has to compete for a place on students’ programs with requirements ranging from mandated and tested English and mathematics to character education and life skills. As Robert Bain and Lauren McArthur Harris correctly point out, the number of K–12 teachers prepared to teach world history is insufficient to meet the growing need. They point to issues of content and methodology as well as teacher preparation and training as essential problems that need to be addressed before students will have sufficient preparation in world history.

The Advanced Placement syllabi for world history provide useful models that generally eschew constructions like “the West and the rest” while maintaining a focus on the development and interaction of nation states. The chronological frame of the AP world history course is generally presented in five parts:

- Foundations: c. 8000 BCE to 600 CE
- 600–1450
- 1470–1750
- 1750–1914
- 1914–2000 and beyond

In addition to the development of a chronological focus, what are the important thematic elements of a world history course, and how can we prepare teachers to choose the models that work for them and their students? Robert Bain and Tamara Shreiner described four prevalent structural patterns in the design of world history curricula, characterizing them as World Civilization Plus, which offers an expanded version of a familiar narrative that focuses on the development of civilization in the West, specifically Europe; Social Studies World History, which offers a multidisciplinary approach to broad themes such as “Time, Continuity, and Change,” but which still does not challenge the “Europe as the Center of the World Model”; Geographic/Regional World History, which considers change over time in differing regions and sometimes braids
these strands together in separate courses on Africa, East Asia, South Asia, or Latin America in addition to a broadly based world history course; and Global World History, which the authors describe as a synthesis of "trans-regional and civilization studies" that requires students to "look at and across regions of the world." The last of these patterns is closest to the model posited by the College Board for the Advanced Placement world history class. This approach requires a balance between periodization, the development of national and regional identities, and thematic constructs that can productively include a variety of topics and approaches. Thematic considerations for teachers of world history can certainly include the following:

**Where to Begin—Is Europe the Center of the World?**

From the perspective of a West African in 1000 CE, the center of the world might be the village or the coast, or the occasional arrival of an Arab or Berber trader. Europe was distant and certainly not the source of culture, religion, or even trade until much later. Mayan and Incan tribes developed extensive trading networks that had no connection to Europe until the 16th century, when the interaction with Spain definitely did not work to the advantage of the indigenous people. By asking students to consider what the world might have looked like at different times in differing societies, we can avoid the presumption that Europe (the West) was the center of all worlds and that non-European people and societies can be productively analyzed exclusively in Western or European terms. A non-Western focus further provides an opportunity to view historical actors as they might have seen themselves rather than as Europeans saw them. In this endeavor, a variety of primary sources, from traditional documents to works of art, provide critical material for analysis.

**Follow the Resources**

Whether the goal is the hunting of mammoths or the acquiring of cotton, oil, or dollars, resources provide the motive force behind the migration of humanity. People move for many reasons, but their survival depends on sufficient resources to maintain the physical well-being of the group as well as its identity. A study of resources can lead us to rewarding analyses of human migration as well as imperialism, colonialism, liberation movements, and the current state of the world. When resources disappear, individual and societal behavior patterns change, and responses to scarcity are as important as the search for wealth.

**What Do People Believe?**

Faith and religion play a major role in the history of the world, and the history of belief should be integral to any study of world history. Religious orthodoxy as well as dissent and persecution contribute to the study of power and politics. Clans, tribes, and nations come to blows over religious ideas and nations are frequently identified with one or another religion. Indeed, world history students in the United States confront a variety of established religions and even theocratic societies.

**War . . . What Is It Good For?**

As a subject for analysis, the history of conflict is extraordinarily fruitful. The reasons for conflict and conquest provide clues to the economic, political, religious, and cultural currents in disparate societies. Claims on territory and resources, along with national ambition provide interesting areas for study, as does the aftermath of war, which can range from conquest and subjugation to post-war shifts in global partnerships. In addition, a consideration of how wars have been and can be prevented has resonance in a contemporary global context.

How can K-12 teachers prepare to teach world history if their training and experience fall short of providing the tools to create courses and realize classroom objectives? My own graduate students, all future teachers, frequently articulate a desire for more training in history content along with their literacy, methods assessment, and classroom management courses. Surely classroom teachers feel the same need to frame their continuing education and professional development around the content of the courses they teach.

As Bain and Harris suggest, one way of providing opportunities for continuing education in world history would be to create a program of Teaching World History (TWH) Grants that provides substantive content training for teachers. However, it is essential that the focus in any such TWH Grant program be on teachers and students rather than school districts. Resources need to be re-directed from an institutional model to one that serves classrooms and students. If our problem is a dearth of qualified classroom teachers, we need to be very clear on the imperative to train these teachers, not in the answers to multiple-choice tests but in the contours of world history periodization and thematic presentation. Utilizing the NEH summer seminars model, K-12 teachers could apply to attend content summer workshops taught
by university professors or master teachers. Of course accountability is an issue that must be considered seriously, but an assessment of teachers' content knowledge can be found only minimally on the bubble sheet of a standardized test. I propose, therefore, that teachers who receive grants in a TWH program be evaluated on the basis of the degree to which they collaborate with colleagues in their home schools by making a rigorous content presentation of what they learned on their TWH "summer vacations" to provide valuable information and materials to others. We must, in fact, include serious sharing of information as a component of such a program, especially in districts in which only a few teachers can take advantage of the grant program. Grant recipients should also be required to bring aspects of world history into their communities through student presentations in school or in other public venues. Essentially, the model is this: teachers earn grants to study world history content; they present aspects of what they have learned to their colleagues; they enhance their own classroom presentation with information learned in the summer; and they encourage student presentations to a larger public (parents, younger students, members of the community) on topics in world history.

If we are to increase the historical and geographical literacy of American students, we need to properly train and then trust our teachers. We cannot accomplish the goal of enhancing learning in history by focusing on tests. Rather, we need to focus on content. World history is a complex subject, and students around the country have demonstrated that they are eager to study it. It is up to historians and history educators to be prepared to teach them.

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Notes

1. Finding World History suggests a somewhat more nuanced chronological framework for a World History course: The Beginnings of Human Society; Early Civilization and Pastoral Peoples, 4000-1000 BCE; Classical Traditions, Religions & Empires, 1000 BCE-300CE; Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 3000-1000 CE; Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1500 CE; Emergence of the First Global Age, 1450-1770; An Age of Revolutions, 1750-1914; A Half-Century of Crisis and Achievement, 1900-1945; The World Since 1945: Promises and Paradoxes. The web sites offers documents and other teaching resources for Africa, East Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Pacific Basin, and South Asia for each of the chronological periods as appropriate. See http://chmh.gmu.edu/worldhistory/resources/whmfinding.php

2. See Robert B. Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, "Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History," History Teacher 38:2 (February 2005), 241-72.

3. For a discussion of "diffusionism" and the reasons to see the study of World History from a non-Western perspective, see J. M. Blaut, The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), Chapter 1.