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The question on how to restructure the initial college history experience is a very subjective one since there are so many variables among individual instructors and the classes they teach. Nevertheless there are a few things which can be considered if a restructuring is to occur.

One of my first thoughts about restructuring the introductory world history course is to throw out the expectation that the course should be a survey of all events since the beginning of time. Students should not have to remember every historical detail of all regions throughout the world. This is counterproductive to the learning experience, not to mention impossible. However, a thematic approach with a few central topics and analysis of primary sources would allow students to gain a more in-depth introduction and knowledge of one or two regions of the world. The areas covered would vary from semester to semester, but these areas would be comprehensive enough to allow for important cross-regional comparisons and themes that would look at topics such as gender, immigration, economies, social class, political centralization, etc.

Secondly, a thematic approach to world history with modern comparisons should be incorporated in the introductory history course. In my own experience of teaching world history I am often asked by students how a certain topic we are covering has to do with modern issues in global politics, gender, environment, immigration, etc. Perhaps there could be a way to bring the two together. For instance, immigration is such a human and ancient development. Perhaps we could look at ancient migrations throughout the world, such as migrations to the Americas, Bantu migrations, Indo-European migrations, Polynesian migrations, etc. and compare these to migrations from the 21st century from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Americas by exploring and comparing causes and consequences. This would at least assist students in making real connections about ancient past with contemporary issues they are reading and hearing about.

Lastly, a part of the restructuring should be to include required field trips that would directly expose students to world history. These would include visits to the DeYoung, Asian Art Museum, Museum of the African Diaspora, Academy of Sciences, national parks and forests, Depression-era public works projects. Other fieldtrips would include places where the field of history is practiced such as the Sutro Archive, the California Historical Archives, the San Francisco Public Library, or The San Francisco Chronicle. And rather than traditional examinations students would work on group projects associated with the field experience. I know these could be difficult for large introductory classes, but nevertheless they would be very effective for introducing students to world history. Another possibility would include exhibits on campus. Perhaps with coordination with other departments such as Classics, Anthropology, Museum Studies, World Literature, or Art History the university can establish more historical exhibits, such as the Global Museum at San Francisco State University. This is where funding and support from the university would be essential, but highly beneficial.

I look forward to sharing these and other thoughts about restructuring the introductory world history experience with my fellow teachers and historians at the H21 conference in August. I hope this will result in a productive and worthwhile learning experience for us all – especially our students.