Thoughts on the H21 Project, by Lendol Calder

World history was one of my subject fields in graduate school, but I've never had a chance to teach it. So why am I joining this group of world history teachers in San Francisco? Well, it happened this way. For some time I've wanted an opportunity to meet Cal State historians who teach lower-level, general education history courses. I've heard good things about innovative work being done by CSU teachers to remove obstacles to success in introductory courses and I wanted to learn more from folks who share an interest in making these courses "a serious house . . . proper to grow wise in," to borrow words from Philip Larkin. A year ago, I secured funding from my institution to travel to California this summer to talk with CSU historians and share notes. So when out of the blue Trevor invited me to come to the August H21 meeting, it seemed like a fortunate stroke of serendipity. I happily said yes. Later when I heard that Bob Bain is coming I got downright enthusiastic. Because Bob and I are old friends. And he owes me money.

Trevor reached out to me because, while I have no experience with teaching world history, something I have given some thought to is the design of introductory history courses, or "gateway" courses as I'm learning to call them. We all know that a problem with high-enrollment gateway courses such as world history and the US history survey is that the casualty rates in these courses are atrocious. The data gets even more alarming when one notes that the highest DFWI rates in gateway courses occur among women, minority, and first-time to college students, which puts these students at greater risk to dropping out of college entirely. In other words, gateway history courses are reproducing American social inequality. The reasons for high DFWI rates in gateway courses are complex and shaped by many factors. But to the extent that teaching methods commonly used in introductory history courses are part of the problem, then pedagogical innovation is urgent. There is opportunity here. As AHA executive director James Grossman wondered aloud last January at a meeting of advisors for the AHA's History Gateways Project, what if ineffective and inequitable modes of teaching in our gateway courses could be turned around so that these courses are no longer the dead end of dreams but gateways to success for all who want to learn? That sounds like a worthy project to work on.

I've been thinking and writing about the problem of gateway course design since 1999 when I was selected to be a Fellow at the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). Since then, I've been pushing forward with others the project of developing a "signature pedagogy" for introductory history courses, which is to say goals and practices for these courses that move teachers away from covering material in forced-march "surveys" to uncovering and demystifying the essential concepts and competencies of historical thinking. I call the approach "uncoverage" because instead of covering up how historical knowledge is created, vetted, and reworked over time, the new course design uncovers the "signature" concepts and heuristics used by historians to make sense of the past and solve problems in our work. Presently, I'm working on the creation of learning modules for intro U.S. courses that make it easier for instructors to uncover the nature and value of history in ways that are effective for learning. World history poses unique challenges I may not be familiar with. But many of the design challenges faced by teachers of American history and World history are shared puzzles. I'm grateful for this opportunity to scheme together on common problems.

In terms of how to teach history effectively in the 21st century, I have convictions about some things and there are other things I'm agnostic about. I do think it's important to get the questions right. Here are some questions on my mind as we begin.

1. **How can knowledge of past pedagogical reforms inform our work?**

   Everything has a history, right? How can the history of history teaching and learning help the H21 project?

   For starters, it can encourage us when the going gets rough. Rethinking how to teach history sometimes feels like lonely, thankless work. But teachers who want to improve how students learn to think about the past are far from alone. We stand on the shoulders of forgotten historians from every generation since the discipline was professionalized who worked to elevate the status of teaching and instigated movements of pedagogical reform. The history of their efforts is a museum of usable ideas we can borrow and build upon. I'm thinking just now of the final exams given by Vassar's Lucy Maynard Salmon (d. 1927) who asked students to deduce the questions the course was meant to answer and then indicate what new questions the student was inspired to work on. (More about this fine idea below.) On the other hand, since failure to change is the dominant note in the history of history teaching and learning, another benefit of bringing a historical consciousness to the H21 project is a sober awareness of the limits we operate under. In the past these limits always seemed to gain the upper hand. But I think we have reasons to hope that a century of what Larry Cuban calls "persistent instruction" really is on the way out in our time, and that our work can help to replace it with something better.

   Above all else, historicizing our project can make us aware of larger contexts that shape what we're doing, as happened in prior moments of curriculum innovation after WWI, WWII, during the 1950s Cold War, and in the late 1960s pushback against behavioralism and American/Western exceptionalism. What are the big challenges of our time that require a rethinking of college world history courses? Is it growing economic and social inequality? Is it climate change? Is it the problem of how the entire world is being asked to become immediately savvy about truth claims made in digital environments? Is it the return of nationalism as a destructive force, detached from Enlightenment values and humane, universal democratic ideals? The list of challenges keeping us awake at night is long. How can we triage the problems that have us wondering where we should put our shoulders to the wheel?

2. **What should it mean to be "introduced" to history at the college level?**

   The question assumes that world history is usually taught as an introductory course serving a general education purpose. Which means that for many students, it is the only history course taken in college. Where this is the case, what should an introductory course accomplish?

   We might think about answering this question in terms of affect, cognition, and subject matter knowledge.

   A lot of people remember their history courses in high school and college as boring. So in terms of affect, I think a major goal of an introductory history course should be to challenge this stereotype, to the point that students feel motivated to add history to their goals for lifelong learning. In my department, this is the first learning outcome for the major, that students will learn to "love history." How can we help students to appreciate history more? The story of how historians at Sam Houston State University revived their history major (*AHA Perspectives on the Past*, November 2018) is instructive in several ways, but especially for how teachers at Sam decided to meet students

"where they are" instead of presuming that undergraduates will be interested in the professors' more sophisticated research interests. Three additional areas of concern that affect how students relate emotionally to history are the kinds of texts we ask students to read, the Big Questions we design courses to answer, and the connections we draw in our courses between the past and our contemporary moment.

In terms of students' cognitive development, I would say that the prime directive for an introductory course should be that no student gets out of the room without recognizing what history is and what it is not. Paraphrasing Sam Wineburg, the biggest problem history educators face today is not that people don't know very much history; the problem is that most don't know what history is in the first place. History is "what happened" says Rush Limbaugh, and the Florida legislature, and most adult Americans. Why shouldn't they? Almost every history textbook written for schoolchildren communicates this message, if unintentionally. If we attempt to challenge this misconception in the one history course a student takes in college, our work is cut out for us. But it can be done by purposefully creating learning environments in which students learn for themselves that history is inescapably an interpretive act. They also need to learn the necessary corollary: that history is not without standards for discerning sense from nonsense.

In terms of knowledge of world history, I do not know what to say. Again, getting the questions right seems important. I think of Paul Gauguin who painted a syllabus under the title "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" He remembered these questions from the Bishop of Orleans who catechized students to ask: "Where does humanity come from? Where is it going to? In the meantime, how shall we live?" A character in John Updike's last novel, *The Terrorist*, similarly says, upon being asked what to study in college: "The story of . . . how we got here, and what now?" Which was the question voiced by Ibn Khaldun in 1377, in the prologue to his history of the world, in which he defined history as the study "of the causes and origins of existing things." I would want a student of world history to be able to give a plausible answer to these questions, recognizing how incomplete even the most plausible answer must be.

3. By the end of a world history course, what should students know, value, and be able to do?

We know to begin our planning with the end in mind. Years after the course is over, what do we hope students know, value, and can do?

Thinking about this question I'm reminded of a scene in the sci fi blockbuster *The Martian*. An astronaut played by Matt Damon has been stranded alone on Mars. Contemplating his fate and the fact that a rescue, if it ever comes, is years away, the modern Crusoe inventories his base camp, his supplies and tools, and determines that he is going to have to "science the shit out of this [problem]." Which he does, managing to grow crops, produce oxygen, establish communications with Earth, etc., keeping himself alive until the rescuers come. It seems like a fine learning outcome for an introductory history course, doesn't it? That students will leave knowing how to "history the shit out of things," or, in the more elegant language of R. G. Collingwood, "develop a discerning eye for the situation in which one has to act." Thinking of history as a verb as well as a noun will require us to think about the essential historical concepts and competencies students should acquire in a course. The experience of Tuning suggests that agreement on what these concepts and competencies should be may come easier than one might think, though I don't believe that 100% consensus is necessary, either.

4. Recognizing that world history is too much to cover, how can we deal with the problem of scale?

I manage the problem of scale in two ways.

The first looks back to the example of Lucy Maynard Salmon and her brilliant final exam. As Salmon recognized, history courses should answer Big Questions. The questions we frame should be interesting to students, have no obvious or single answer, and, as we struggle to answer them, they should lead students into the heart of the discipline, requiring that students learn the linchpin concepts and competencies of historical thinking. The Big Questions determine the course. Every text that is read, every lecture given, every discussion and classroom activity, every test and assessment, should align with the Big Questions in ways that are evident to students. The Big Questions become filters for determining what goes into a course and what is left out.

To illustrate, in my introductory US history course the Big Questions are:

- What is the story of American history?
- When historians make sense of the past, how do they distinguish between more plausible stories and less plausible stories?
- How can historical thinking make my life better?

Another way I manage the problem of overwhelming scale in a history course is with the power of big stories or metanarratives. History is a sense making activity. Humans make sense of things in a variety of ways, using algorithms, scientific methods, poetry, etc. But we seem hardwired to prefer to make sense of things through stories. Story is the form of meaning humans know best, it is the most basic and early template for memory. Big stories provide students with the framework they need to understand and remember historical actors, movements, processes, and periods. Without big stories, when the past is presented only as chronology or historiography, students find themselves on the receiving end of fact after fact, catching at the bricks of knowledge being tossed their way. They don't do what we want them to do, which is to take those factual bricks of knowledge and build a pattern of meaning with them. No, in their heads the facts end up in a meaningless pile without pattern and hence beyond recall. Remembering facts doesn't come from rote stamping them in memory; there has to be a form to what is given. Stories provide Velcro-like hooks for individual facts that otherwise are forgotten.

I also emphasize stories because if you ask a historian to explain something, chances are he or she will tell you a story. Stories are how historians usually make sense of things. Teaching students to tell plausible stories, and how to recognize narratives that can't possibly be true, seems like an appropriate goal for courses aiming to introduce students to history.

So in the courses I teach, one of the Big Questions always takes the form "what is the story of _____?" What is the story of American history? Of African-American history? Of the history of consumption? And so on. Since there is always going to be disagreement about what story to tell, about the best way to make sense of the past, the course is thus imprinted with one of history's signature concepts, the need to consider multiple perspectives and points of view. Asking "what is the story of _____?" gives coherence to a history course, a theme that students find meaningful because these are the sense-making narratives they will encounter over the rest of their lives in their reading and social media activity, in their work and in their civic lives. It is also important to

consider stories that are not being told, and why that might be. And it is important to ask whether narrative is even the best way to make sense of the past in the first place. I find that all of this is doable in an introductory course. Stories are the most powerful pedagogy in a history teacher's toolbox. I'm in favor of using them more than we typically do.