

Ed Dickinson

Colleagues:

I wanted to offer a few very brief thoughts about teaching the world history survey, as my initial contribution.

First, I should say that I teach only a ten-week course in twentieth century world history, and so have thought only about that format. I find the idea of teaching world history over a longer period (whether 4000 BCE to the present, or 1000 CE to 1500 CE, or even 1500-1750 CE) to be daunting. I think it extremely difficult and perhaps impossible to conceptualize coherent patterns and trends across such long periods without being reduced to a level of abstraction that is platitudinous. So my thought about this will have relevance probably to a minority of you—I think most of us teach those longer periods.

In any case, with that comment I think I have touched on the central point to me, and I'm sorry it is so obvious but here it is: world history needs to be taught as a conceptually coherent whole, tied together by quite concrete processes of change that are global in scope. As historians have been stressing since I believe the 1970s, coverage is impossible and stultifying, so the instructor in world history has to maintain an entirely sovereign conceptual stance with respect to the particular events that she chooses to use to illustrate the processes she is focusing the course on. Events—the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, World War I, or for that matter the Reformation—have to be treated as products and examples of those global processes of change on which the course as a whole is focused.

In order to do that, I think one needs a textbook that supports this approach. I'm sorry to insert an advertisement for my own book here, but I did not find any textbook that I felt a) did that and b) did it while focusing on the processes that I wanted to focus on. I reviewed 15 textbooks; I found many that were episodic rather than conceptually coherent in structure; I found some that were conceptually coherent in structure, but came mostly from a culturalist perspective. The latter is fine—I am primarily a cultural historian myself—but I did not feel that it was appropriate for my particular students at UC Davis. We're the biggest engineering school in California, the leading agricultural school in the country, very heavy on STEM disciplines, and I felt that I needed to start from the predominant interests of our student body, and build from there. So, I wrote my own textbook. I would love to see many of my colleagues adopt the book; but in truth I suspect that writing one's own textbook is the best way to teach world history. That may sound crazy; but you've probably got your lectures written anyway, and it's super easy to self-publish.

The other reason to do that, for me, was to stop trying to provide a coherent narrative in class time, and focus instead on the other task that countless historians have argued since the 1970s is

critical: teaching students to "think like an historian." The recurring mantra since the 1970s has been that the content is less important than the cognitive orientation and intellectual skills. How do we model what kinds of questions historians ask, what kinds of problems they face, and what kinds of answers they construct, and give students practice at doing that? How do we model and give them practice in the central nuts-and-bolts skills historians use? I have focused on doing that through case-studies—of individual biographies (I use mostly obscure ones); some of particular localities at critical moments (Hawai'i in the 1870s and 1880s works beautifully); but also of particular topics. I let the students choose most of the latter, at the start of the course. Popular ones in the past few years have been genocide, terrorism, the space age, multinational corporations, socialism, women's rights, and indigenous rights. (I try to anticipate what topics students will choose, and choose readings that match those topics; but I miss every year on a few of them, and that seems to be fine. Students seem to be OK with the fact that there is not a perfect match between topics addressed in discussion sections and topics addressed in class time, as long as I can make persuasive connections between them for the class.) I use each of these topics to refer back to the central processes in recent world history around which I have built the course.

But what is "thinking like an historian"? More important, what is "thinking like a world historian"? There are endless lists available in the literature—the four key skills, the five Cs, the six . . . etc. For myself, and for my purposes in teaching 20th century world history, I think it doesn't matter what list we want to use—they are all plausible. But I do try to talk to students about what makes our discipline distinctive, quite different from the humanities, and from the social sciences, and drawing from each. Among other things, I think that our discipline is a radically reflexive one. Every historian knows that she is herself a product of history; every historian knows that the conceptual tools that she uses are themselves historically conditioned. So I work very hard to get students to place themselves in 20th century world history . . . and then to think about how the world would look if they were in a different "place" in that history. I don't cast the course as an exercise in self-discovery (too precious!) but I also DO try to cast the course as an exercise in self-doubt. I ask students to consider where they "sit" in world history, and how that affects their perspective on the world. Second, I also try to present students with the idea that the job of historical thinking is not primarily to come up with answers but to deepen and broaden inquiry. This to me is the most persuasive part of Sam Wineburg's argument—that "contextualization" is central to "how historians think." To me, that means deepening and broadening perspective. Combining these two characteristics of history as a discipline, I try to talk to students about the costs of coming to conclusions. A colleague of mine—John Smolenski—speaks to his students in every class about the "iron law of unintended consequences"; since a very high proportion of my students (about 40 percent) are International Relations majors, I think this is particularly important for me. I think world history is a particularly strong position from which to address these topics. Perhaps particularly in California, it is very easy to get students to reflect on their own history and fate as products of global processes of change.

I think world history is also a particularly strong position from which to teach students the historian's habit of playing with scales—in space and time. I speak to students about this as the habit of seeking out connections between the general and the particular; and the biographical case-studies I use are particularly helpful in this respect.

And finally, I try to give students as much practice as I can in "reading"—and by that I mean listening intently, as historians uniquely do, to the ideas, vocabularies, assumptions, and experiences of people very different from themselves. I do that not only through readings from primary sources, but also through some statistical exercises (asking them to figure out what the experience of the people whose lives are partially reflected in historical statistics might have been).

If I put this all together, I think you can see the conceptual architecture of the course. It's shaped by a commitment to modelling and teaching four intellectual orientations or habits (reflexivity, radical contextualization, the conceptual benefits of flexible use of varying scales in time and space, and close "reading"). It's built around a limited number of historical processes/patterns (in recent years I have focused on technological change, world economic integration and its varying consequences, violence, and cultural globalization—but I think any concrete processes, for which one can develop exciting case studies, would work). And I use a wide range of case studies to build bridges between those broad processes and those intellectual habits.

A last thought, regarding the enterprise of this conference: for all my fairly intensive engagement over the past 35 years with Foucault, and complexity, and genre theory, and Talcott Parsons, and Gramsci, and so forth, I remain an historicist. And I am aware that for some historians, that is a dirty word. I think that's a good thing—ours is a capacious, fractious, diverse discipline; it is that way because of our place in the history of the past three centuries; I think our ongoing engagement with the multiple legacies of that history is the enduring strength and relevance of our discipline. So if we're rethinking how to teach the world history survey, I would vote for as broad and disunified a set of agendas as possible. We don't ask our students to accept one version of history as correct; we shouldn't ask each other to accept one way of teaching world history as correct. I would prefer to see a wide palette of specific and coherent approaches, underpinned by a broad body of concrete suggestions (exercises, assignments, topics, case-studies), each clearly tied conceptually to one of those coherent approaches.