

I have only a modest amount of experience (7 years) teaching the introductory survey (in my case, World History) compared to many participants in this August's workshop. I was hired at the University of Pittsburgh in 2012 into a "world history" position, a description I found exciting but about which I knew next to nothing. My own scholarship didn't fit neatly into any standard geographic box and I found the breadth of world history as a framing device exciting. I had absolutely no idea what I was in for in the classroom. It's been far more challenging and rewarding than I imagined, and I have come to believe that the conceptual freedom a "world history" perspective offers is why it such an immensely valuable survey course for undergraduates—particularly freshman but any year. World History can open students' eyes to the immense, fascinating complexity of the world; teach them some basic global geography; and, help them to make connections with people, places and time periods very different from the ones they know well.

I started teaching the world history survey in a mid-size classroom, at least as far as Pitt is concerned. We are a big public school and history courses when I began at Pitt were divided into four different levels: 15-student seminars, 40-student mid-size lectures, 80-student lectures, and 160-student lectures. I was lucky to join a department with a major commitment to the field (the World History Center at Pitt was established by Patrick Manning in 2008) and two tenured world historians already on the faculty. My colleagues thought it was fine if I began teaching *only* the last 1000 years of human history. I made many errors that first year, but I got one thing right. I "hooked" the survey around a particular approach—specifically, commodities. This was a field and an approach to history with which I was quite comfortable (I was finishing a book on the history of the early modern pearl trade) and I first chose the commodity approach for what it did for *me*—but it became clear that it worked very well for students, too. It gave them a particular focus amidst the overwhelming coverage of a world history class.

The culminating assignment of the course (one I've continued to use) is what I refer to as the "commodity paper". I ask students to identify an actual *thing* in their life that means something to them and to consider its history in world historical context, drawing on course material. I've had students choose everything from a piano, to jewelry, to alcohol, to a boat, to a family recipe.

What I didn't realize when I made up this assignment—but what I understand now as a more experienced teacher (in general, and as a teacher of world history, specifically)—is that this assignment is excellent at getting students to do one of the core skills of world history: scale switching. They have to situate their personal connections/commitments/interests in a larger historical context and think about the large-scale factors that have shaped their lives. When it works (and it almost always does), it gets them to realize they are part of something much bigger than themselves/their family/their friends: they are a part of connected global community. I have come to believe that one of the main opportunities and responsibilities that the world history survey course offers is to help students develop empathy for (and if we're lucky, interest in) people unlike themselves. In survey classes, at least at big public schools, in which the vast majority of our students are non-majors, we have the opportunity and responsibility to show students what it means to view the world with curiosity and compassion. These survey courses—world history, American history, whatever (just please no "western civ"!)—are absolutely critical to our mission as educators and we must work hard to be as good at them as we can be. The stakes are far higher than our concerns about dwindling numbers of history majors. Figuring out how to teach these critical college courses as successfully as possible involves conversations like the ones we are having this weekend, sharing best practices and goals, and also working with

our colleagues in the K-12 classroom to learn from them and vice-versa. If we are lucky, and teach well, we can teach history not as a series of names and dates but as a way of thinking and being in the world.

Playing to our skills and improving where we're weaker: Over the last decade as a teacher, beginning before I had any exposure to world history (though teaching world history has certainly honed it), I've realized that I'm a much better lecturer than I am a leader of small group discussions. There's a lot to be said for playing to our strengths in the classroom and I value the fact that my students find my lectures interesting. But I don't shy away from the need to work on my weaker areas. I had a pivotal breakthrough in my world history teaching thanks to a faculty class I took a couple of years ago that was focused on how to encourage student participation in classes (it was called "Speaking in the Disciplines.") The course was open to professors from all humanities disciplines and there ended up being about 8 of us in the class, only 2 of whom were historians. I learned so many tricks from my peers and it was great to have space every week to talk about teaching. I completely reworked my World History syllabus the following semester and introduced new techniques into my classroom. It was my most successful semester of world history teaching ever.

These changes looked as follows:

- 1) Less is more. I assigned one short, excellent textbook (Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World*) and one collection of short journalistic case studies (Topik and Pomeranz, *The World that Trade Created*.)
- 2) I divided my 35 students up into small groups at the start of the semester, roughly 4 students per group. The class met twice a week and at the start of each second class, the students would meet as a group and discuss distinct sections of the reading, producing online summaries of that section's key points that all their classmates could consult (cliff notes, as it were.)
- 3) At the end of each second class, the students took a 20-minute open-note, open-book quiz online, asking them 4 questions about recent reading assignments and lectures. I graded these promptly on a 1-4 point scale and left thoughtful, specific feedback for each student.

By the end of the semester, students were writing me long, beautiful reflections on the weekly assignments and discussions, encouraged by my comments and by the privacy of the medium. By the time they took the (open-note, but not open-book or computer)midterm and final exams, they had accumulated a sizeable compendium of their own and their peers' notes on the assignments and lectures, as well as all their quizzes and my feedback. They really *engaged* with world history, writing about it as groups and as individuals every single week.

I still talk too much in class, and they don't talk enough, but these techniques are cohort-building, facilitate group conversation and familiarity, and above all, help them to talk over what they've learned each week.

I have also become increasingly committed to how much college-level survey teachers (all teachers!) can learn from educators in the K-12 classroom, and I now oversee the Alliance for Learning in World History, which is dedicated to running small professional development

workshops for world history teachers and scholars to help get these conversations started. We ran our first workshop in June 2019 and it was fantastic and we'll keep going next year. Here are the takeaways from that conversation in case people are interested (below).

**TAKEAWAYS FROM JUNE 2019 WORKSHOP ON “HOT TOPICS IN WORLD HISTORY”,
HOSTED BY THE ALLIANCE FOR LEARNING IN WORLD HISTORY (ALWH),
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

Some Major Questions that Face Teachers in the World History Classroom:

World History: What is it? How do we explain it to our students?

Scale: World history presents major challenges as far as scale is concerned. How can we help our students to think across huge stretches of time and space and also keep a sense of the human-scale on which each life unfolds? In other words, how do we help them master large-scale processes and the importance of small-scale lived experience?

Periodization: How do we pick our “pivot points”, i.e.: the dates where we start and end our classes or otherwise indicate as being particularly important? How do we justify the dates that are given to us by textbooks/schoolboards/exams?

Breadth: How do we cover everything we need to cover? How can we do more with less and minimize students' sense (and our sense!) that world history is totally overwhelming?

Testing: how we do deal with testing and what it does to *what* we teach and the pace at which we teach it? This issue has been discussed a great deal in the last year in the context of changes to the AP World curriculum, but it is an issue for teachers at every level.

Technology: What does it do for us and what are its limits? How can we make the most of it in our classrooms?

History as a Gateway: the enormity of world history (everything fits!) gives teachers so many ways to illustrate the connections between history and other fields—we can help the budding doctors/scientists/engineers/mathematicians/etc. see why the past is relevant to their chosen fields of study.

The “Western World” problem: What is the role of the world history teacher and the world history curriculum when it comes to supporting or undermining old notions of the “West and the Rest” and the very concept of “civilization”, western or otherwise?

Present-Day Realities and Changing Demographics: As teachers, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to acknowledge the changing demographics of our districts and the changing realities of the world around us. How do we build a curriculum that reflects and speaks to our students?

Sources: Teachers need supplementary sources for content, not just awesome new technology/apps. Primary sources are one thing but getting a sense of the cutting-edge secondary literature on any given topic (i.e.: big debates in world history; latest research in gender/migration/sex/health/labor etc.etc) is another. Compiling a list of helpful online resources is helpful but so are well-designed professional development programs.