

Pedagogical Content Knowledge for World History Teachers

Bridging the Gap between Knowing and Teaching

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—EDITORS

BY LAUREN McARTHUR HARRIS AND ROBERT B. BAIN

We are conducting studies to determine what knowledge world history teachers need and how they can use it to plan instruction. Here, we report on a small but in-depth study designed to examine how four pre-service and six in-service world history teachers think about, organize, and make meaning of separate world historical events, for themselves and their students.*

The teachers were asked to organize a seemingly random stack of cards listing 18 historical events and concepts into a “big historical picture” by placing each card on butcher paper, adding labels, and drawing lines to connect events and give them meaning. While the participants sorted the cards, they talked aloud about their decisions, revealing their thinking. Teachers did the card sort twice: first, to capture their own understandings, and second, to explain how (or if) they might structure those events for instruction.

The differences among the 10 teachers were stunning. Although all the teachers drew connections or categorized events along temporal-spatial scales at some point or another, there were discernable differences in how the more experienced world history teachers built connections among events, constructed coherent historical narratives, related world historical content to students’ understandings, and employed such conceptual devices as

cross-cultural or temporal comparisons or examples as pedagogical tools for organizing instruction. The experienced world history teachers not only constructed complicated conceptual maps with more multiple and fluid connections among events, but also, although not prompted to do so, began to classify events as global, cross-regional, or regional, and to explain connections among events situated at the different scales. For example, Figure 1 (on page 14) shows the initial card sort by the most experienced teacher. He filled the space between cards with connecting lines and/or language to show dynamic relationships among and between events, regardless of their region, time period, or scale.

The inexperienced world history teachers were more likely to simply place the cards in chronological order or within categories, such as economic or governmental groupings. Because some drew connecting lines between categories, such as government and economy—but not among the events—it appears that the categories became more important than the events (see Figure 2 on page 15).

The key difference between the novice and experienced teachers appeared to be the teachers’ knowledge of global world history *and* their ability to attend to students’ needs in learning world history, including likely misconceptions and points of interest. For example, one experienced teacher used some cards twice in his instructional organization, explaining that students needed a big picture of the global story at the beginning of his course and that they would later return to those same events to study them in more depth (see Figure 3 on page 16).

Beyond the type of history courses typically taken by history majors, history teachers need courses offering the knowledge and skills needed to create coherent and flexible organizational

schemes. Knowledge of both particular events and possible connections spanning centuries, millennia, nations, continents, and hemispheres seems to enable teachers to develop and teach more meaningful connections. □

*Lauren McArthur Harris is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan and a former high school world history teacher. Robert B. Bain is an associate professor in the School of Education and in the Department of History within the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Previously, he taught high school history and social studies for 26 years. This article is adapted with permission of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, www.taylorandfrancis.com, from “Pedagogical Content Knowledge for World History Teachers: What Is It? How Might Prospective Teachers Develop It?” *The Social Studies*, Volume 102, Issue 1, January 2011, pages 9–17, copyright 2011.*

*Lauren McArthur Harris, “Building Coherence in World History: A Study of Instructional Tools and Teachers’ Pedagogical Content Knowledge” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).

Figure 1: The most experienced world history teacher's first card-sort map

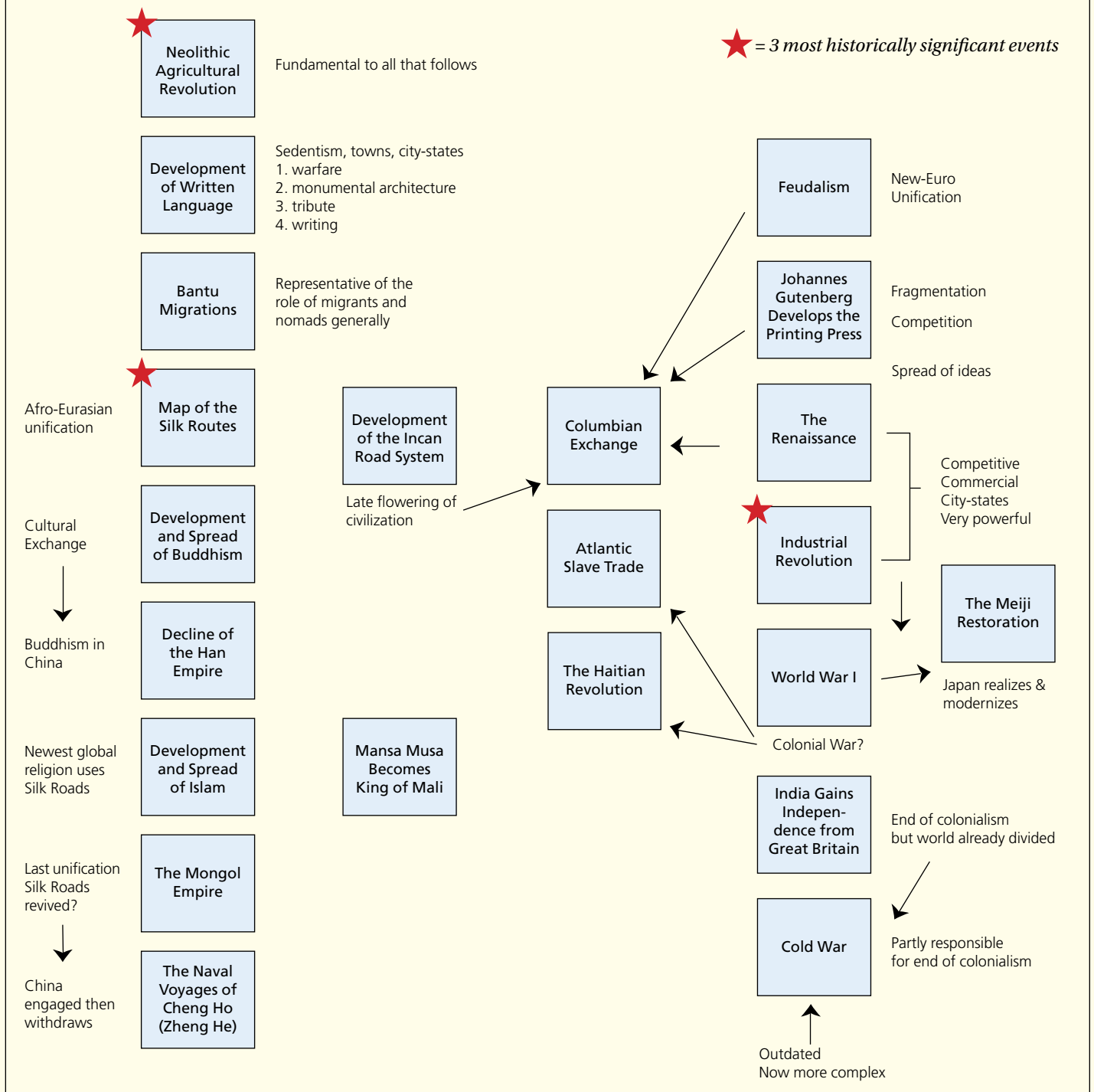


Figure 2: A novice world history teacher's first card-sort map

Individuals who have made a significant impact on different cultures

★ = 3 most historically significant events

Transportation of goods/people

The Naval Voyages of Cheng Ho (Zheng He)

Bantu Migrations

★
Columbian Exchange

Atlantic Slave Trade

Development of the Incan Road System

The Mongol Empire

Map of the Silk Routes

Mansa Musa Becomes King of Mali

General developments affecting the entire world

Cultural movements/
economic changes

Johannes Gutenberg Develops the Printing Press

Development and Spread of Buddhism

Development and Spread of Islam

★
Development of Written Language

Industrial Revolution

Conflict (violent & non-violent)

The Haitian Revolution

Events shaping both physical and cultural boundaries of nations

Political system

The Meiji Restoration

Cold War

India Gains Independence from Great Britain

Feudalism

Neolithic Agricultural Revolution

★
World War I

Decline of the Han Empire

The Renaissance

Figure 3: An experienced world history teacher's second card-sort map (instructional organization)

