New York State Global History Classrooms: Case Study, Essential Question, and Social Studies Strategies Integrate Standards, Frameworks, and Assessments

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In New York State (United States), global history is taught as part of the social studies sequence (grades 9-10) in senior high school. Between 1995 and 2015, in order to graduate with a state sanctioned diploma, students had to pass a Global History and Geography examination at the end of the two-year course of study. The exam generally consists of fifty multiple-choice questions, some of which require understanding the main idea in a quote, chart, map, or political cartoon, a thematic essay question that provides students with a series of potential alternatives to write about, and a guided document based essay based on between eight and ten primary and secondary sources consisting of images and text (New York State Department of Education, nd.). Students with grade level literacy usually have little difficulty with the test, however, the overall passing percentage in the state is usually between 50 and 60% (New York Post, 2012).

In 2014, the Board of Regents, the governing body for education in New York, voted to make passing the exam an optional requirement for high school graduation and to restrict the examination to the global period from 1750 to the present covered in the second year of the global history curriculum (Singer, 2014a). The implications of these changes for the teaching of global history are still being debated. However, there is considerable concern among teachers of social studies, university faculty, and social studies professional organizations that by focusing the exam on events from 1750 to the present, the curriculum diminishes the global impact of the Columbian Exchange and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Hildebrand, 2014).

In the King James version of the Christian New Testament (c. 1611), Matthew (6:24) warns his disciples “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and
despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” Unfortunately for social studies teachers in the state of New York, the Board of Regents, appears to be unfamiliar with this Biblical injunction. Social studies teachers are subject to at least three contradictory masters making different sets of demands: national Common Core Standards, New York State Content Framework, and in Global History, and the summative “Regents” assessment. Overarching these individual foci, social studies teachers are required by supervisory evaluation rubrics to engage students as active learners and deep-thinkers in their classrooms: a very mighty task (New York City Department of Education, 2013)!

Herbert Kohl (1994) has long proposed that teachers can utilize “creative maladjustment” as a means to adapt to potentially conflicting demands. According to Kohl, teachers must skillfully interpret the various state mandates and school requirements in ways that permit them to successfully engage students and satisfy their own sense of professional obligation, or as Shakespeare has Polonius advise his son Laertes in Act 1, Scene 3 of The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, “This above all: to thine ownself be true” (c. 1599).

Teaching global history is complicated by national Common Core Standards that define academic skills that should be incorporated into content classes at different grade levels, but do not address content and concepts. Curriculum decisions related to content and concepts have traditionally been controlled by state and local entities. There is also deep disagreement in the United States over what should actually be taught in the Global history curriculum. It is a conflict exacerbated by an ideological tendency toward “American exceptionalism” in world affairs (Lipset, 1997). In 1994 voluntary United States and Global History content standards developed by the National Center for History in Schools with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities were overwhelmingly rejected by the United States Senate (Thomas, 1996, B8). Curriculum writers were accused of emphasizing minor historical figures on the world scene such as Mansa Musa in a misguided attempt to promote multiculturalism and placing “Western civilization . . . on a par with the Kush and the Carthagians” (Natale, 1995, 18-23). The voluntary content standards were modified in an attempt to satisfy critics, but in the end were largely abandoned (Singer, 2014b, 71-75).

The demise of the global history exam can be traced to the 2010 elimination of the New York State 5th and 8th grade history and geography tests. This was because of pressure to have teachers prepare students for Common Core exams and to secure federal Race to the Top dollars (Singer, 2014a). Currently, in grades 3 through 8, students, teachers, schools, and
school districts are evaluated based on student performance on reading and mathematics examinations aligned with Common Core standards. As a result, prior to ninth grade social studies is taught haphazardly at best and students enter high school with little if any knowledge of the history of the world. Meanwhile, high school global history teachers are expected to invest time on academic skills rather than content and concepts to prepare student for the next round of Common Core aligned assessments.

Recognizing the instructional gap, in 2014, New York approved and distributed a Social Studies Framework revised to be aligned with Common Core kill requirements (engageNY, 2014). They included concepts and topics for the 9th and 10th grade global history curriculum, but not a calendar or lesson ideas that were left to local initiative. The Framework identifies what tenth grade students should learn about imperialism including Western European interactions with Africa and Asia as “competing industrialized states sought to control and transport raw materials and create new markets across the world.” Students are expected to explore how “European industrialized states and Japan sought to play a dominant role in the world;” examine imperialism from a “variety of perspectives such as missionaries, indigenous people women, merchants/business people and government officials;” “trace how imperial powers politically and economically controlled territories and people including direct and indirect rule in African (South Africa Congo, and one other territory), India, Indochina, and spheres of influence in China;” and “investigate one example of resistance in Africa (Zulu, Ethiopia, or Southern Egypt/Sudan) and one in China (Taiping Rebellion or Boxer Rebellion and the role of Empress Dowager CiXi).” It was believed that miraculously this content knowledge and conceptual understanding could somehow filter down to the lower grades.

Other chronologically organized but thematically based areas in the tenth grade global history Framework include the World in 1750; 1750-1914: An Age of Revolution; Causes and Effects of the Industrial Revolution; 1914-Present: Crisis and Achievement in the 20th century; Unresolved Global Conflict (1914-1991); Decolonization and Nationalism (1900-2000); Tensions Between Traditional Cultures and Modernization; Globalization and a Changing Environment (1990-Present); and Human Rights Violations.

The above Framework omitted critical curriculum content presented to students in leading world history textbooks (Beck, et al, 2005, 734-740). Conspicuously absent in the Framework are mentions of capitalism and socialism as historical forces shaping the 19th and 20th century, although communism in China and Russia is mentioned in discussion of the Cold War.
This is a major and probably ideologically derived omission as capitalism in these centuries is an engine of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, North America, and Japan, and the primary transformative force behind increasing globalization (Singer, 2011, 151-153). Capitalism was responsible for the exploitation of workers in the metropolitan centers and Third World people and is an underlying cause of socialist, communist, and nationalist revolutions. Crises in capitalism not only lead to periodic worldwide depressions but they are major causes of national implosions leading to civil war and genocide. Omissions such as these virtually force responsible global history teachers to utilize Kohl’s principle of “creative maladjustment” if they are going to engage students in a thoughtful and systematic appraisal of major historical events. Teachers can have students examine these fundamental economic ideas and the movements they generated within the different topic areas identified in the Framework.

Skillful teachers of social studies can also overcome instructional barriers by creating instructional opportunities that move students beyond assessments. As teacher educators and former secondary school social studies teachers, the authors encourage global history teachers to consider five questions as they plan units and lessons. What are the essential questions students should ask about global history? What is important for students to know and why? What skills as historians do students need to understand complex material and issues? What skills and attitudes do students need to function effectively as global citizens? How do teachers design lessons that engage students as active learners?

Presenting endless information about obscure societies may prepare students for assessments, but fails to generate student interest or develop conceptual understanding of global history. While students needs some sense of the scope of global history, a case study approach that focuses in depth on different regions of the world and different groups of people at different historical moments better prepares students to act and think as historians. Rather than presenting detailed and repetitious accounts of each river valley civilization in the ancient world, Tigris-Euphrates, Nile, Indus-Ganges, and Yellow-Yantze, teachers can have students examine in depth the “civilization package” – the development of agriculture, technology, state formation, organized religion, trade, infrastructure, population, literacy, and numeracy – in one of the river valley civilizations and then more briefly look at similarities and differences with other ancient world civilizations. In a case study approach students hypothesize why some river valleys did not developed complex societies, and taking Mayan civilization out of chronological time, explore
how indigenous people in Meso-America developed what was essentially a river valley civilization without the presence of a river valley.

In a similar fashion, a comparative study of 20th century revolutions can focus on selected anti-imperialist movements from different parts of the world. Students can compare and contrast revolutionary independence movements in Algeria in the Islamic world, Vietnam in South East Asia, India in south Asia, Kenya in sub-Sahara Africa, and Cuba in the Americas exploring regional geographic and cultural differences, the role of outside forces during the Cold War, and the impact of revolutions in one part of the world on others. For example, Algerian rebels marched through the streets of the Casbah in Algiers shouting Dien Bien Phu following French defeat in Vietnam.

A major focus in an anti-imperialism study should be the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. It ended without war, it mobilized people across the globe, and high school students played a major role in educational campaigns in Soweto in the 1970s, actions that should capture the interest of students.

A thematic focus on anti-imperialist struggles introduces students to a number of essential questions that bear careful and thoughtful consideration. In these struggle, who are the terrorists? Do revolutionary and anti-imperialist ends justify the use of brutal means? Under what circumstances, if any, is revolutionary violence justified? Under what conditions, if any, can social transformation be achieved through non-violence struggles? Why do successful struggles often end in oppressive governments or with leaders in complicity with former colonial regimes?

A case study approach allows global history teachers to focus on places, areas and people in a way that helps students to question their own assumptions about human actions, the past, and the world they still live in. Ireland was Great Britain’s first colony and unlike in Africa and Asia the Irish victims of British imperialism and laissez-faire policies were also white Europeans.

Whether because of bias in the textbooks or because of oppression in the past, fewer women, non-Europeans, and working people appear in the historical record. Teachers can introduce students to surviving transcripts of the trial of Joan of Arc and students can discuss the role she played in 15th century nationalist and religious wars in Europe and her emergence as a French national symbol. Mansa Musa’s empire in Mali is described in ibn Battuta’s 14th century accounts of his travels and illustrates the way the Islamic world was tied together, not by military might and central administration, but by trade, religion, and Arabic, the language of the Quran. German peasants took Martin Luther’s 95 theses seriously and issued their own revolutionary
religious documents demanding social equality. In Indonesia, at the end of the 19th century a young Aceh woman named Tjut Njak Dien led a guerrilla army in the struggle for national independence. Careful reading of primary source accounts from the historical record, establishing timelines, tracing events on maps, and debating the historical significance of events and individuals often ignored in historical accounts, satisfies the skill demands in Common Core while expanding the world view of students, challenging their assumptions, and keeping history and geography at the heart of the global history curriculum.

In a social studies approach to global history (Singer, 2011, 9-10), students travel back and forth between the past and present, using the present to gain insight into the past and using the past to understand the evolution of the present. An interesting way to start the school year is by having students identify essential questions they will examine as they study global history. One strategy employed successfully by different teachers affiliated with the Hofstra University social studies education program is to toss a soccer (football) ball around the room (Bigelow, 1997, 112-119). When a student catches the ball, they have to tell the class something about the ball and then toss it to someone else. A list of "discoveries" is posted on the board and when nothing more can be added, students discuss which of the notations is related to global history.

On one occasion, the first student who caught the ball described it as a "sphere" and threw it to a friend. Other answers, roughly in sequence, were "round," "multi-colored," "the world plays soccer," "octagon," "covered with symbols," mostly white, "used to play a sport," "patterns," "filled with air," "made by Adidas," "barcode," "used," "made in Pakistan," and "round like the Earth." In the discussion, following the soccer ball activity, students questioned why the ball was manufactured in Pakistan and wondered about its impact on life there and also life in the United States. This quickly became a discussion of child labor, poor working conditions, unemployment, cheap prices, whether you should shop at super-stores, "What are the positive and negative impacts of globalization?" and "Why child labor continues in the world today?"

In another activity, student teams pour through piles of newspapers circling headlines about global events that affect their lives and identifying headlines and questions they have about both the world today and history. In one high school global history class questions included "Why do people keep having wars?" "Who is a terrorist?" "Why would someone become one?" "Are national borders still important in today's world?" "Can national governments stop international crime?" "Does global trade (globalization) make countries weak?" "How come the things that people need to live are too expensive for them to buy?" (Singer, 2011, 5-8).
On other occasions student generated essential questions included “Why does religion impact on history?” “What makes a civilization civilized?” “Why are women usually treated as inferior?” “Why do the West and White people dominate the world?” “What would have happened if everyone was the same race?” “Who decides what type of government is superior?” “Is world peace a reasonable goal?” “Are there moral absolutes?” “What obligations do we have to others?” “Is technology making the world better or worse?” “How can we know what’s true when governments and media are all biased?” “When is it exploration and when is it exploitation?” “What is the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter?” “Is it all about oil (battles for scarce resources)?” “Who benefits and who suffers from globalization?” “What happens when global warming undermines our ability to survive?"

Student questions can be posted on the classroom walls so classes can return to them and add to them during the course of the school year. Researching answers to their questions about the past and present involves high school students in exploring the full scope of global history. For example, discussions about the role of religion in society take place in units on early human cultures, ancient civilizations, empires that emerge in China, India, the Mediterranean world, and Meso-America, the development of feudalism in Europe and Japan, cross-cultural conflicts between Christian and Islamic societies, the spread of trade across Asia and Africa, the European Renaissance and Reformation, the creation of modern states, and genocide and war in the modern world.

Serving multiple masters, especially in the age of ongoing assessment and continuing focus on skill development can be demoralizing for global history teachers. However a little “creative maladjustment,” coupled with a case study, essential question, social studies approach to history, can transform classrooms from dreary places where students memorize information while they prepare for tests into exciting arenas where students engage in active learning as they become historians.

References

