

# **LOCAL ROOTS, GLOBAL BRANCHES: ELEMENT OF SECONDARY HISTORY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

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## **Abstract**

The history of American education is a history of local control. Symbolized by the image of the one-room “little red schoolhouse”, from our nation’s beginnings, schools have been under the direction of local communities. Teachers were hired by local school boards, who paid their salaries and often provided housing and food as well. Curriculum was also set locally, although often through the choice of textbooks, or primers, that were the published work of various education “experts” from other places. Importantly, teachers were also fired locally. As a result, American education has long been quite sensitively calibrated to local outlooks, concerns and politics.

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## Introduction

Before World War II, and certainly before 1920, there was little formal teacher training in the United States. Teachers often taught the way their own teachers had taught, and often from the same books, so a certain series of what elements of history were taught and in what order was established, but largely through local tradition and practice, and not through a certain planned curriculum. The move from being a principally agrarian nation to largely industrial one over the course of the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries greatly affected the development of how history was taught in two ways. (Edward Shizha and Michael T. Kariwo, 2011).

The first affect of industrialization is about sequence. US history is taught three times in the current sequence in many states, once to the fifth grade (when students are around 10 years old), again in the eighth grade (at age 13 or so), and finally in eleventh or twelfth grade (at age 16 or 17). These grades mark the history of the expansion of required schooling. In earlier, more agrarian base eras, compulsory education ended in grade, and later through age 16, with many students completing high school through 12 grades. At each of these and points, most curriculums taught the history of the American Nation, feeling it was important to send students into the world with a properly patriotic and nationalist formation of their understanding of what it meant to be American.

This particular nation-building approach to history was felt to be necessary because of the second element of American industrialization: the arrival of large number of European, and then some Asian immigrants

to work in factories and in large-scale industrialization project such as the building of railroads. As large numbers of non-English speaking, non-Protestant immigrants arrived in the United States, it became cultural and politically important to both immigrants and non-immigrant for these new arrivals to “learn to be American.” And the teaching of American history, particularly in its most mythological and nationalistic forms, become a political and social imperative.

So, how does this effect current history education in the United States? First of all, there is still no single standard for a history curriculum in our country, while the National Council for the Social Studies—which is an independent association, NOT part of the federal government—does publish an outline of history education, each of the fifty states and several special districts that make up the US is responsible for developing its own set of curricular standards. And teachers are, this day, hired and fired by local school boards, with funding for the schools based primarily on local property taxes, and not on federal money. So even within one state there can be a huge variation in how those standards are applied in the classroom.

### ***Two principal approaches for teaching history***

That said, there is still a strong connection between textbook publishers and textbook content. And since it is financially prohibitive for publisher to print special version of their books for each state, several large states, particularly relatively conservative Texas, largely determine the content and approaches most history texts used across the country.

There are two principle approaches to teaching of history in the US. One might best be described as the **“Traditional Approach”**. This way of conceptualizing the American past focuses on “big man” history and preaches American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is the best country in the world and that the history taught in school should reflect this “fundamental truth.” Elements of US history that are unpleasant, or challenging to this America-centric approach are often glossed over, or re-cast in more favorable light. (Robert Holland et al.: 2013).

The second might be termed the **“Progressive Approach.”** This set of ways of imagining America sees it as a multicultural mosaic, and it makes particular use of social and cultural historical methods, often examining the individual histories of many different types of Americans. While America as a whole may still be presented as “special,” this approach places the strength of America in our diversity, rather than primarily in the wisdom of the (mostly) white (mostly) men have. Overwhelmingly been our country’s leaders. (Robert Holland et al.: 2013).

It should be noted that each of these approaches has its own “fringe.” The Traditional Approach has spawned a so-called “Christian” approach to history, in which conservative religious historians argue that they call our nation’s “Christian Heritage” and God’s special blessings for Americans are guiding elements of understanding the “genius” of America. On the liberal side, some school districts with high number of minority students have adopted ways of teaching history based on “Ethnic Studied.” These courses often have a strong “social justice” component, and they stress the power dynamics of racial and gender identity as

critical lenses for understanding our American past.

These two sidelines help illuminate the major fault line in American history teaching, which falls most strongly around issues of race and gender, and the degree to which American history teaching should ask critical questions about the darker corner of our history, particularly around issues of slavery, racism and the use of violence to promote social control. Another main ideological question is whether American should be a “melting pot,” in which each wave of immigrants fully accommodates itself to a single American identity, or a “salad bowl,” in which all our nation’s different ethnic and racial parts can be mixed together while each still retain its own distinct ethnic identity.

Since 1898, the United States has fashioned itself into globally dominant power. In particular, the second half of the twentieth century was arguably an American era, during which we played a dominant role in the affairs of other nations. But only recently has the teaching of history in the United States begun to catch up with this. The balance of my paper will address the need to teach World History in the state curriculum.

### **The University of Michigan World History Initiative (WHI)**

In the 1990’s, a significant change occurred in how schools were funded in the State of Michigan. Following a court decision which decided that local funding of school was unconstitutional because it create vastly divergent levels of funding for students in poorer communities (mostly in rural areas and in the state’s decaying urban core,) school districts became funded through a centralized state mechanism, in which local school taxes

were collected by the state and then redistributed on a *per capita* basic to individual districts. So districts still hire and fire teachers, but the money for salaries, and in fact for all element of school administration, now pass through state government. As a result, the Michigan Department of Education and the state legislature now have large influence on local education than they did previously.

Using this new leverage and as part of a large project to help Michigan refashion its economy as the auto industry was facing large challenges in remaining profitable, Governor Jennifer Granholm institute a new state curriculum in 2007. For the first time ever in the state's 175-year history, Michigan's schools were now required to meet an established set of curriculum standards. This includes a sequence in Social Studies that specifies in high school must have a year of "World History" as part of their course of study.

This posed a challenge for many of the state's school districts. An initial assessment of the state's school estimated that only one-third of Michigan school districts already required World History for all their students in high school. Another third of school offered World History in some form, but usually only for students in more advance tracks, such as Advanced Placement courses. A third of school districts did not offer World History in any form. So, in relative quick order, many Michigan history teacher were required to teach a course they either had never taught before, or had taught in advanced fashion. Additionally, the state did not provide funding for teacher training to handle the new requirements, nor did it look into how such requirements would be assessed.

Several professors and researchers at the University of Michigan, who had been involved in drafting the new Social Studies standards, began to consider how they might help fill this gap. Led by Prof. Robert Bain, a recognized expert in history education, the University established a program called the World History Initiative that offered training for teachers in both curriculum content and teaching pedagogy.

### ***Curriculum content issues***

There were two principle issues with curriculum content in World History courses. The first was that many of the courses labeled "World History" tended, in fact, not to be World History. Instead, many were essentially what Prof. Bain has termed "European History plus Affirmative Action." That is, these courses adopted a fairly well-established European history framework, and "added in" information on other part of the world, which for Asia largely focused on East Asia (Japan, and to some extent China,) and sometimes South Asia (India, almost exclusively, and largely only about Gandhi and Indian Independence.) In any events that included American experience, the focus often retrenched to American experiences (for example, looking at World War II or the Vietnam War through the experience of American soldiers.) Nobody, most courses were absolutely silent about difficult parts of America's global history, including almost no mention of American colonialism in the Philippines, or of American political meddling and involvement in Latin America. Much of the history of the 1950s-1970s was taught through a lens of Cold War analysis, with America as the purveyors of global freedom.

The second was the most teachers for these courses had attended college before there was such a thing as “World History,” which is fairly new discipline. Teachers therefore were not trained to think globally and thematically, but tended to offer their “affirmative action” case studies from material they were comfortable with themselves. But this led to these courses feeling like a presentation of “one damn thing after another,” that is they lacked comparative and theoretical cogency, and what students learned was often depended on what teachers were comfortable teaching. So one class of World History in a school might spent a great deal of time on China, for instance, while a course in the same building taught by another teacher might spent little time on Asia, but much on Latin America.

Additionally because many teachers had not formal training in World History or its methodology, many of the courses being offered struggled with pedagogical issues. Most importantly, teachers had a difficult time deciding what scale or resolution to focus on (individual? local? national? regional? trans-regional?) and on how to scale among these different scales, what to prioritize, and what level of detail to provide at various levels.

### ***Teacher training workshops***

The WHI addressed both the problems of content and pedagogy through a series of teacher training workshops. Each workshop addressed a different era of the World History standards. For each era, the workshop provided a discussion of the “large global themes” of each historical era, along with presentations by senior scholars from eight different regions—Western Europe; Eastern Europe and Russia; the Middle East and North

Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Latin America; South Asia; East Asia; and Southeast Asia. These presentations were linked in term of similar content from each of the world areas. Teachers were asked to imagine how they might use the material presented by these scholars in their own classrooms, and particularly to think about how they might link the presentations from different regions to create a more complex view of global interactions for their students.

Pedagogically, the WHI workshops focused on three skills that are helpful for teaching world history: 1. building meta-narratives for students; 2. Working with historical scale; and 3. Differentiating connection and comparison.

### ***Building meta-narrative for students***

Often teachers launch into the teaching of history without students an adequate framework for the material they will be studying in an given unit. That is, we assume that our students will learn the material, and, on their own, build it into a large picture. Furthermore, we often don’t refer back to earlier material we have taught in previous units, but instead treat each new unit as its own separated set of material.

Research shows, however, that students who are taught in this manner rarely develop the “large story” on their own. Instead, teachers need to create meta-narratives on which students can “hang” the new cases they study. Furthermore, teachers need to constantly ask question about how new material related from earlier historical cases and themes.

WHI taught two pedagogical approaches that help with these problems. The first is to begin each new unit with a full

overview of what will be forthcoming. That is, we taught teachers to tell the basic story of the unit in the first class with the new materials. It is important to give students that context so when they reach new material, they can already begin to place it within the framework the teacher is suggesting is important.

The second is the use of quick “reviews” at the beginning of each class of what materials students already know “set the stage” for the materials in that day’s class. To do this, Prof. Bain suggests teachers think of this opening few minutes of class as being similar to the “Previously On” segment of many television drama shows. These quick compilations at the start of many television dramas remind viewers of what happened not only in the previous week’s show, but also of material from further back that may be relevant to what will be forthcoming. This sample process of re-setting context and reminding students of past content goes a long way towards helping students build cogency in their historical understanding, and helps move the teaching of history from being about “one damn thing after another” to being about imagining the larger connection of historical narrative. (Phyllis Weinstock et al. 2011).

### **Working with historical scale**

In teaching World History, the scale of what being examined becomes enormous: multiple world regions with many different national and cultural histories seemingly scream to be addressed, as do larger regional questions, and even global ones that can be quite complex, say the effect of global depression in the 1930’s, or the role of decolonization in the 1940’s-1960’s. Where to

situate a student’s view is a challenge, as is the question of which details remain important when historical analysis pans to larger-scale questions. In particular, as teachers pull the lens outwards, they lose the juicy details of individual cases that help make history interesting to students. (Phyllis Weinstock et al. 2011).

To help address this challenge, WHI taught teachers how to “scale in and out” on their context. That is, we addressed techniques that would allow teachers and students to connect the interesting detail of a smaller local case to the dynamic of the meta-narrative I have discussed above. Once teachers and students are comfortable looking at the details of individual cases within a larger thematic context, students easily learn to scale out from a specific case (for instance, the planting and cultural life cycles on a coffee plantation in Java) to larger regional and global questions (the development of Indonesian nationalism and the role of commodity prices in a global economy).

The most important technique here is to teach thematically rather than geographically. For example, when teaching about slavery, one might look simultaneously at questions in West Africa and the Caribbean, at East Africa and the Indian Ocean, and in China. The next week, looking at colonialism and imperialism, the teacher might discuss Indonesia, India and Belgian Congo. Two weeks later, while looking at industrialization, perhaps the students will look at England, Japan, and the United States. This thematic approach replaces more traditional practices of first looking at Asia, then Africa, then North America and Europe over a certain time period. Then, by using the “Meta-Narrative” and “Previously On” techniques, teachers can

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then ask student to think about whether there are connections between slavery in certain part of the world and industrial development. (Phyllis Weinstock et al. 2011).

***Differentiating connection and comparison***

With all these larger questions. We found it was important to help teachers distinguish between historical element that are actually connected (e.g., the growth of plantation income under the *Cultuurstelsel* in the Indies and the expansion of railroad network in Holland) with those that may be similar. For instance, if we can link the growth of industrial infrastructure in the Netherlands with the increasing profit from Javanese plantation agriculture between 1830-1870, what does that allow us to say about cotton grown in India and industrial expansion in England at roughly the same time? Are these two cases actually connected? Or are they simply comparable? There is, of course, no single correct answer to this question. But students are asked to sharpen their analytical skill and their historical technique by responding to such analytical questions, and not simply just assuming that everything that happens historically either linked, or is individual.

Of course, this all raises again questions that are central to the American teaching of history. Which themes should be selected? Which cases should be highlighted? How do we prepare teachers to be comfortable in moving among a multitude of historical cases, in different places and across different eras? How do we prepare students to see and remember meta-narratives and to be able to understand their connection with individual cases? How do we teach students to

think critically when elements of society would prefer that they simply receive a rather uncritical education in nationalist history? How do we help students to see themselves as citizen of the world and not merely citizen of their own countries, while also not losing their senses of local identity? These are the critical concerns for teaching American history today, as we move from our local roots and out to our global branches and back again.

This is the question, interestingly, that was asked centuries ago by *Javanese poets*, so I end with a verse from a famous Javanese *kidung*:

*Ana kayu amjurwa sawiji  
Wit buwana epang keblat papat  
Agodhong mego angine  
Amerdapa kakwung  
Kembang lintanf salaga langit  
Sira andaru kilat  
Who surya lan tengsu  
Asirat bun lawak udan  
Apupucuk akasa bungkah pratiwi  
Oyote bayu bajra*

There was a first tree  
The tree of the world, whose branches  
reached in the four directions  
Its foliage are the clouds blown by the wind  
Its new young leaves are the rainbow  
Stars bloom, the buds of the heavens  
And stars bearing good omens fall swift as  
lighting  
Its fruit are the sun and the moon  
Whose beams are the dew and the rain  
The leaves as its very tip in the heavens are  
the base of the world  
Whose roots are the wind and thunderbolts

Source: *Kidung rumeksa ing wengi*, KS 583.2, stanza 19, p. 30.

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