

Why Teach World History?

This article, like others in this Forum, is inspired by a belief that it is useful to think about why we teach World History. Different instructors may choose to emphasize different goals. I will try to justify briefly below each of the goals that I outline. The order in which I address these goals reflects more the order in which I became conscious of them than any sense of their relative importance. I will suggest for each goal some implications for what and how we teach.

Goal #1: To show that there is one interlocking history of humanity

This is perhaps the key insight of World History: that events and processes in one time and place build on events and processes in earlier times and places. At a point in world history when xenophobic forms of nationalism seem to be on the rise in many parts of the world, and these nationalisms threaten global peace, World History can provide a useful reminder that all parts of the world have been influenced (in both good and bad ways) by other parts of the world. No nation or region can reasonably claim an independent internally driven history. All nations and regions should appreciate their long history of borrowing ideas – technological, cultural, artistic, political, economic, and more – from others. Interactions with others have profoundly shaped every nation and people in the world.

Some students may not wish to hear this message. They may wish to maintain a naïve belief in the independent development of some group of people (They may not wish to learn either about the fluidity of cultural identity in the past or of the recentness with which many of the identities we take for granted were consciously appreciated). Such students, if not told of our goal, may simply ignore or downplay the importance of all of the examples of cross-societal interaction placed before them in a World History course. If we instead clearly state a goal of outlining one interlocking history of humanity, we will force such students to actually engage with repeated examples of cross-cultural contact. Can they really ignore them all?

One way in which students might downplay the importance of all of these cross-societal interactions is to doubt that what happened centuries or millennia ago is really all that important in understanding our modern lives. It is essential, then, that we convince our students not just that history is full of interactions, but that we can describe, and strive to understand and explain, how the events and processes in the distant past set the stage for later events and processes, including those of today. That is, we need to convince them that history matters.

It is thus essential that World History be more than a compelling set of stories. We must go out of our way to connect these stories. We must show how technologies, institutions, and beliefs develop through time (with occasional setbacks). Note here that instructors and students of World History often worry about coherence: What is it that ties tales of ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, and Polynesian seafarers together? Students may (or not) appreciate each individual narrative, but will wonder about the point of putting them all in one course. We must constantly show students how what is happening in one lecture or chapter builds on what had happened in earlier chapters or lectures. We may also want to hint at how we are setting the stage for later events and processes.¹ We should not be shy about pointing out when there is a direct connection between events in the distant past and circumstances today.²

If it makes sense to speak of one shared World History, then it also makes sense to speak of our shared humanity. The fact that peoples have for centuries or millennia borrowed ideas from other peoples is an indication of some considerable degree of human similarity. Of course, ideas are often transformed as they move from place to place: Buddhism in China was not quite the same as Buddhism had been in India. Our shared humanity does not prevent us from having different cultures and institutions. World Historians – and our students – must grapple with the relative importance of our similarities and our differences. It is again valuable to be explicit with our students: World History will on the one hand highlight our common humanity but also provide many examples of both individual and group differences. We want our students to appreciate our shared humanity, but also value personality and cultural diversity.³

It is thus invaluable for World History courses to be explicitly comparative. In what ways are societies similar, and in what ways are they different (recognizing importantly that there will always be some of each)? In what ways do merchants, rulers, or parents behave similarly in different times and places, and to what extent do they behave differently?⁴ When we see similarities, is it because of cross-societal transmission or because people in similar circumstances will often act in similar ways? When we see differences, can we trace these to differences in natural environment or politics or economy?

Goal #2: To (allow students to) place the history of any individual, country, or group within that history

We have just recognized that World History must be a story of both similarities and differences. We can hope that students going on to take courses about particular times and places will try to place these in a World History context: appreciating both interactions with and similarities to other times and places. Yet even students who never take another history course should be able to place an understanding of (at least) their time and place in history within a World History context. Importantly, they should be able to see how the history of the world has shaped their own lives. Students can potentially gain some greater sense of meaning by seeing themselves as part of a larger human story (which may involve also identifying themselves in a non-xenophobic way with the history of a particular people or peoples).

While we should always be careful with value judgments, it is important to show that all societies have done things that most people would judge to be “good.” They have developed useful technologies (indigenous societies in the Americas and Pacific built canoes and kayaks that were marveled at and replicated by others, among many other useful technologies), produced works of art that are widely appreciated, produced goods or services that others wanted to buy, and so on. It is not too hard to show that most/all societies have also engaged in more questionable practices such as warmongering. People are people, and humans everywhere have the capacity to do much good but also inflict much harm. One of the tasks of World History is to show how people everywhere grapple with the bad and achieve the good.⁵

One of the challenges of World History is to find a place for the individual. It is often much easier to describe the interplay of societal or natural forces: technology, climate, trade. But individuals did not just let history happen to them but actively shaped their lives – and often the lives of others – in order to make the best of their historical circumstances. Their efforts in turn shape history. [We return to the role of individuals below.]

Goal #3 To highlight the importance of thematic interactions, and of history for understanding these

In its earliest days, World History naturally emphasized cross-societal interactions (as we have above). Yet over time textbooks and courses in the field have come also to stress the importance of thematic interactions: how culture, politics, economy, demography, social structure (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and more) and other themes interact in driving historical processes and events.

There is, I think, a critical lesson that emerges from the careful study of world history: that virtually every transformation in world history involves the interaction

among multiple themes. Whether we are trying to understand the causes or effects of a particular transformation, we will rarely if ever find that these are primarily political, cultural, or economic in nature. Rather, we will generally find that multiple themes interacted in generating a particular process or event, and these in turn had effects on many themes.⁶ The development of agriculture was likely influenced by (at least) climate, population, the slow development of necessary technologies, and the availability of suitable plants and soils. Agriculture in turn set the stage for urbanization, states, social stratification, economic growth, and many other outcomes.

Since our themes have a rough correspondence with human science disciplines, there is an important lesson here regarding interdisciplinarity. Many students in university World History courses (especially required World History courses) will be Majors in Political Science or Economics or other such disciplines. These disciplines by their nature tend to downplay the linkages between the phenomena they study and those studied in other disciplines. It is no bad thing for such students to learn repeatedly about the historical importance of interactions among the things studied in different disciplines.⁷ It is likewise useful to remind History Majors of the interdisciplinary complexity of history. History itself is characterized by fields that mimic disciplines: social history, political history, gender history, economic history. World history suggests that we need to appreciate how these interact.⁸

It is useful, then, for us to be explicit about the themes that we will be addressing in our course. While themes such as “economy” and “politics” may require little explication, it is still useful to talk a bit about which economic and political phenomena we will address. We tend to talk a lot about trade, for example, even for early time periods when only a very small fraction of total output was traded long distances, precisely because of the fact that trade facilitated the cross-societal movement of religions, art forms, political institutions, and much more. With respect to “culture” and “social structure,” we need to carefully define these terms, as well as identify which elements of culture and social structure we will emphasize. There are, sadly, literally thousands of different definitions of culture in the human science literature,⁹ and we should spare World History students the indignity of wondering what we have in mind.

We should also try to appreciate the full set of themes. In addition to those listed in the first paragraph in this section, there are clearly times and places in World History where technology (and science), human population and health, art, human psychology, and the natural environment are important components of World Historical narratives. Students may gain a very biased understanding of history if we simply omit some of these from consideration in the interests of convenience.

Having been clear about our themes, we cannot emphasize too much that they interact. We should be wary of spending one class on culture and another on politics when the magic of World History lies in their interaction.

Goal #4: To better understand our future

I had this goal in mind as I drafted *Making Sense of World History* (London: Routledge, 2021), but it became even more firmly entrenched in my mind when I wrote *Making Sense of the Future* (London: Routledge, 2022). There is, quite simply, no better guide to coping with and shaping our future than our collective understanding of our past.¹⁰ Futurists now appreciate that we cannot very reliably predict future outcomes. Yet we can identify a set of plausible futures. We do so by extending trends visible in our past into the future, and reflecting on how these may interact. World Historians, then, in discussing trends (in economic output or war making or democracy or gender relations) can invite students to reflect on how these might (or not) continue into the future.¹¹ World Historians, in stressing thematic interactions in the past (see above), can guide students to reflect on how these might interact in future.

Our inability to reliably predict the future reflects in large part the operation of historical contingency. While we can try to explain events and processes with recourse to our understandings of thematic interactions, we should also recognize that history is inherently unpredictable. A close battle or mad ruler may have important historical repercussions. There are also historical surprises (often called Wild Cards in the future studies literature) such as epidemics or natural disasters that could not have been predicted (though we should surely know by now that such things happen reasonably often). World Historians can usefully discuss how societies have and can prepare for and react to such surprises.¹² More generally, World Historians can provide a useful service in having students reflect on how many of the events and processes discussed in the course would have been surprising to people of the time. One lesson we might strive for is resiliency: We should try to identify plausible futures but also “expect the unexpected.” We can be surprised by many things but should not be surprised that life is surprising. Humans have grappled with surprises for thousands of years.

We should be explicit about the tension between the goals espoused in the preceding two paragraphs. We should strive to identify patterns (trends and interactions) in history and project these into the future. We can then talk about how we might try to adjust some of these trends in order to achieve a more desirable future. However, we should be humble in doing so for the future will surely surprise us in many ways.¹³

Goal #5: To show how people cope with complexity in different times and places

This is a less obvious goal. Yet this is a goal of the humanities in general: Readers of history, biography, and literature can learn something about how individual humans cope with complexity.¹⁴ All humans must grapple with complexity in their lives and

cannot get too much advice on how to do so.¹⁵ We benefit both from learning how others master circumstances that are similar to our own and from how they cope with circumstances that are unfamiliar. In the latter case, we may develop skills at handling novelty – and we all encounter novel circumstances in our lives.

Though this goal may be less obvious to instructors, it may resonate powerfully (if perhaps subconsciously) with students. Since they must grapple with change in their lives, they may be particularly interested in how people grappled with historical change. While they will be interested in how people in general coped – how they voted, or protested, or adapted – they will likely be even more inspired by stories of individual actions.

One challenge here is typicality. Instructors will have to remind students that each individual is unique. Students should not assume that any individual they encounter is typical of their time and place – though it is useful to reflect on how typical they might have been. In what ways might a particular individual be similar to and different from other individuals in their time and place?

Another challenge is that we often know very little about any individual, especially as we move farther back in history. Even for the powerful, we often know only how they behaved publicly, and little about private thoughts and actions. We must purposely seek out, then, vignettes that give us a more well-rounded view about how diverse individuals behaved in different times and places. We must appreciate that we do not have such vignettes for all past societies.

Goal #6 Skills

We have segued in the preceding section into a discussion of skills: students can develop through history skills in coping with complexity and change. There are others:

- Developing skills in evaluating primary materials. As noted above, students cannot appreciate the understandings that World History conveys unless they develop an appreciation of how historians evaluate the historical record. This is best achieved by having class discussions around particular primary sources.
- More generally, developing critical thinking skills. As has been hinted above, students should develop skills both in identifying particular causal relationships (say, how those in power may influence cultural values) and in understanding complex webs of interactions (why did agriculture emerge?; why did the French Revolution happen?). World History is well suited to the development of both types of critical thinking. Students' ability to do so depends on their instructors regularly moving beyond Who, What, When, and Where questions to engage with Why and How.

- We might stress a particular critical thinking skill: drawing comparisons. Students are often very bad at comparison, “comparing” quite different aspects of different societies. Instructors can model good comparative practices (Note here that carefully defining the themes and phenomena we will study sets the stage for good comparisons). Instructors also can advertise the importance of comparison: we can neither appreciate the uniqueness of any society (or person) nor seek to generalize unless we first carefully compare. As argued above, World History is inherently comparative, and thus provides many opportunities for developing this important skill.¹⁶
- We might likewise stress the appreciation of different perspectives. We can do this at the level of historical actors: Why did different people have different attitudes (say, Cicero and Caesar about the Roman Republic), and how can we appreciate each. We can also do so at the level of historians: Why do these interpret history differently? My personal sense is that the latter is both important and dangerous: Students can come to disparage history as a practice and think “any interpretation is as good as another” if regularly acquainted with scholarly disagreement. I would advocate then also teaching skills at integration so that we can aspire to transcend such disagreements and develop a more comprehensive understanding.

Final Thoughts

That was a lot, wasn't it? It may be tempting to say that World History courses are too busy already without addressing the many pieces of advice provided above. Yet I think that the challenge is one of organization: How do we frame the material that we present to students? Much of the advice provided in this article need not require a lot of class time. It simply requires instructors to be more explicit about what they are doing and why.

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Notes

¹ In my *Making Sense of World History* (London: Routledge, 2021), I started each chapter with a discussion of how we would build on earlier chapters and set the stage for later chapters. I also was not shy about referencing other chapters in the body of the text.

² There is, as just one example, a connection between Viking explorations many centuries ago and the fact that Denmark administers Greenland today – though there was a gap of centuries in Scandinavian habitation on the world’s largest island.

³ I do not want to dig too deeply into modern political debates, but would suggest that an appreciation that we can simultaneously value both diversity and commonality could dramatically improve the quality of public debate.

⁴ I tried in *Making Sense of World History* (2021) to identify the main challenges facing a couple dozen types of agent (merchants, rulers, etc.), and then compare how these challenges were addressed in different times and places.

⁵ Patrick Iber, “History in an Era of Fake News,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 22, 2018, argues that since politicians and others regularly misuse history to support their (often nationalist) point of view, historians need to counter with a more accurate rendering of history. Historians then need to convince students of the evidence on which their interpretation – and history more generally – relies.

⁶ A couple dozen flowcharts in my *Making Sense of World History* (2021) serve to illustrate the cross-thematic interactions at work in major historical transformations. These are available for download as PowerPoint slides at <https://www.routledge.com/Making-Sense-of-World-History/Szostak/p/book/9780367820886>

⁷ At the high school level, instructors of World History can help students make sense of Social Studies material. Social Studies curricula often dabble in a range of Social Science and Humanities disciplines without providing students with much idea of what those disciplines look like, and even less idea of how their subject matter interacts.

⁸ In my *Integrating the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge 2023) I argue that historians have an important role to play in the human science understanding of the links among any set of phenomena. Most human science research focuses on the last couple of decades and is thus extremely limited in identifying under what conditions a particular relationship holds. History can examine a much wider array of circumstances.

⁹ Frederik Stjernfelt, “Criticizing Erroneous Abstractions: The Case of Culturalism,” in Claus Emmeche, David Budtz Pedersen and Frederik Stjernfelt, eds., *Mapping Frontier Research in the Humanities*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) lists sixteen distinct broad definitions of culture (and many variations within), and appreciates that his list is not exhaustive.

¹⁰ Priya Satia, in *Time’s Monster: How History Makes History* (Harvard University Press, 2020) argues that our understanding of the past shapes our understanding of (political institutions in particular in) the present, and thus our efforts to shape the future.

¹¹ Students will be better able to draw connections between past and future if we regularly draw connections between past and present. In doing so, of course, we should be careful of “presentism,” judging past actions and beliefs through the eyes of the present. Yet we should not allow justifiable concern with presentism to cause us to shrink from drawing any connections.

¹² See, for example, Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka de Keyzer, Eline van Onacker, and Tim Soens. *Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹³ I provide more detailed advice on how to integrate future studies into a World History course in my “World history and future studies,” this journal, October 2021.

¹⁴ This implication became clear to me as I wrote *Integrating the Human Sciences* (Routledge 2023). It can be seen as a “humanities-ish” purpose of history, whereas the discussion above about understanding particular causal relations might be seen as a more “social-science-ish” approach. I argue that we should see the humanities and social sciences as partners in an integrated human science enterprise.

¹⁵ See for example Theodore L. Steinberg, *Literature, the Humanities, and Humanity* (Albany: Open SUNY, 2014).

¹⁶ I am indebted to Marc Jason Gilbert, who stressed the importance of critical thinking and comparison in his presentation in our Forum at the World History Association conference in Bilbao in June of 2022.