

# Pedagogical Content Knowledge for World History Teachers

## *Bridging the Gap between Knowing and Teaching*

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Common sense asserts that teachers need content knowledge to teach. Perhaps this is why the public, policymakers, and teacher educators in the United States have worried about teachers' content knowledge for well over 150 years. At least since John Dewey's 1902 essay "The Child and the Curriculum," these worries have taken two related but different forms.

The first set of worries centers around the amount of content knowledge teachers possess in the subject areas they teach. Such concerns typically equate content knowledge for teaching with content knowledge as defined by universities for majors and minors. Hence, university course work has become the proxy for measuring the content knowledge required to teach subjects in most states.

The second concern, which is more common among teacher educators than others, focuses on the *instrumental quality* of teachers' content knowledge. This particular type of knowledge that teachers need to help specific students learn specific content (including subject-specific facts, concepts, and skills) is known as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK).

Unfortunately, the extant research on the PCK teachers need to teach various school subjects is modest and uneven, with most of the research focusing on content areas such as math and reading, and fewer studies on other subjects, such as history.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, almost all of the work on teacher knowledge in history has focused on teachers of U.S. history or other national histories. There are few studies that have looked carefully at the knowl-

edge needed to plan and teach world history at the secondary level. Thus, although world history is the fastest growing course in secondary social studies,<sup>2</sup> there is little consensus over what constitutes the knowledge teachers need to help students learn the history of the world.

We are currently conducting a series of 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 and discrete world historical events, first for themselves and then for their students. This study—part of a larger study by Lauren McArthur Harris on instructional tools and teachers' PCK of world history—offers insight into teachers' varying capacity to use nested scales of time and categories of space to build coherence among a wide range of historical events.<sup>3</sup> Of the six practicing history teachers in the study, four had taught high school world history for at least three years with a wide range of world history-specific professional development, one had taught high school U.S. history and was teaching world history for the first time, and the other was a veteran teacher and scholar of world history with more than 10 years of teaching experience in secondary and university world history classrooms, as well as extensive world history-specific professional development.

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 onto a large piece of butcher paper, adding labels, and drawing lines to connect events and give them meaning. The 18 cards spanned many time periods and geographic locations, and listed different global, interregional, cross-temporal, and regional events, such as the Atlantic slave system, Bantu migrations, the Renaissance, the Haitian Revolution, and the Cold War. While the participants sorted the cards and built their concept maps of world history, they all talked aloud about their decisions, revealing their thinking for each move.\* 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 instructional purposes.

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 discernible 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 veteran teacher with over 10 years experience. 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.

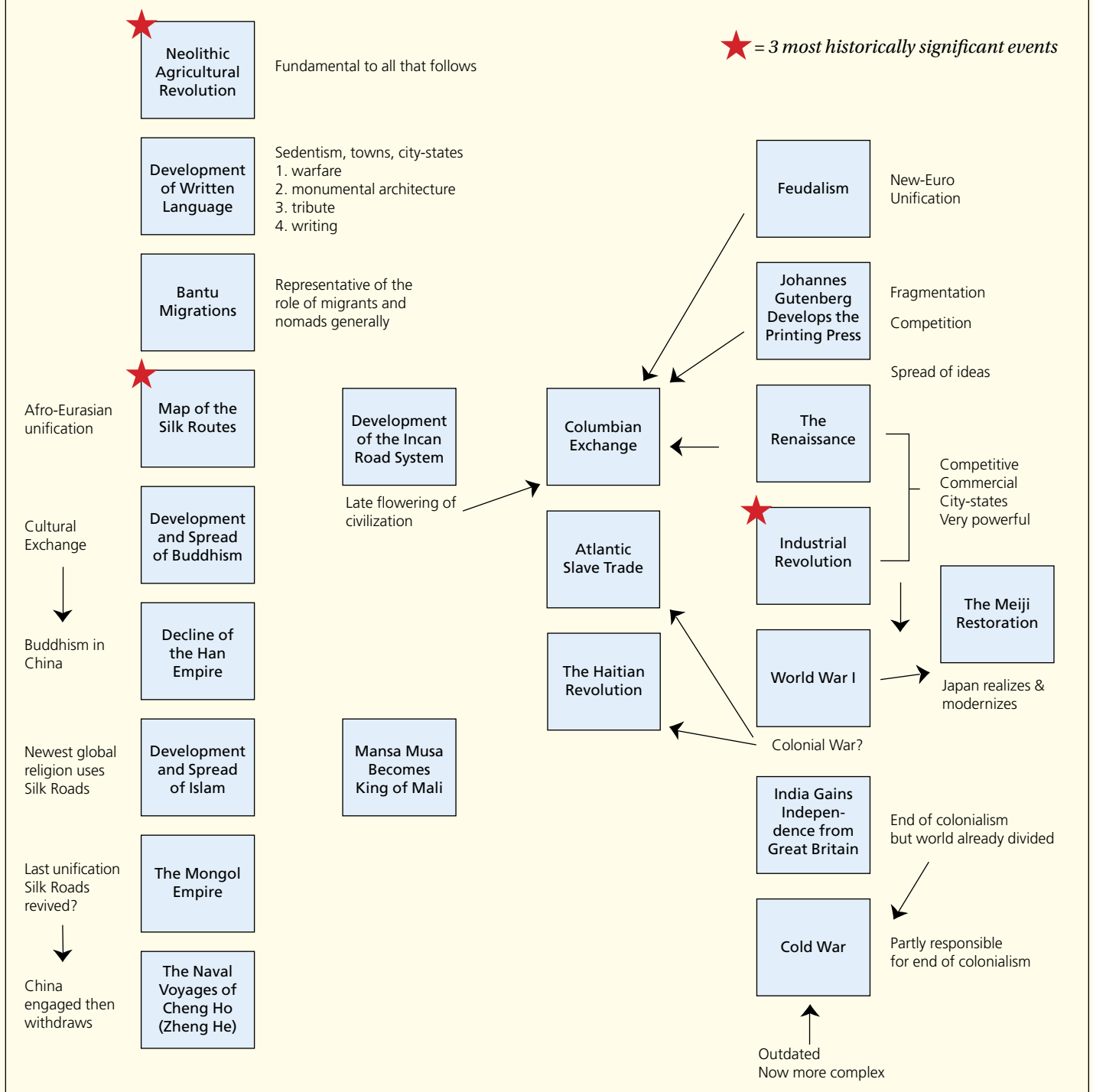
In organizing the cards, the experienced world history teachers moved swiftly among scales and events, and back again—often puzzling over how to situate an event that spanned eras or regions.

On the other hand, the inexperienced (pre-service) world history teachers were more likely to simply place the cards in chronological order or within categories, such as economic or governmental groupings. Two things differentiated their maps from the ones discussed above. First, there were far fewer attempts to connect events to each other. Second, once an event landed in a category, the inexperienced teachers typically treated it as an example of that category. Thus, it tended to lose its place in the arc of history.

\*Harris used an analytical framework developed through a content analysis of every monograph in the *Journal of World History* from its first issue in 1990 until 2008. In her analysis, she located conceptual devices world historians implicitly or explicitly use to build coherence in their work. (See endnote 3.)

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



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). When they did make connections between events, novice world history teachers did not offer much detail or they hesitated when explaining or even drawing connections. Further, the inexperienced teachers often appeared to be unsure of how to represent particular

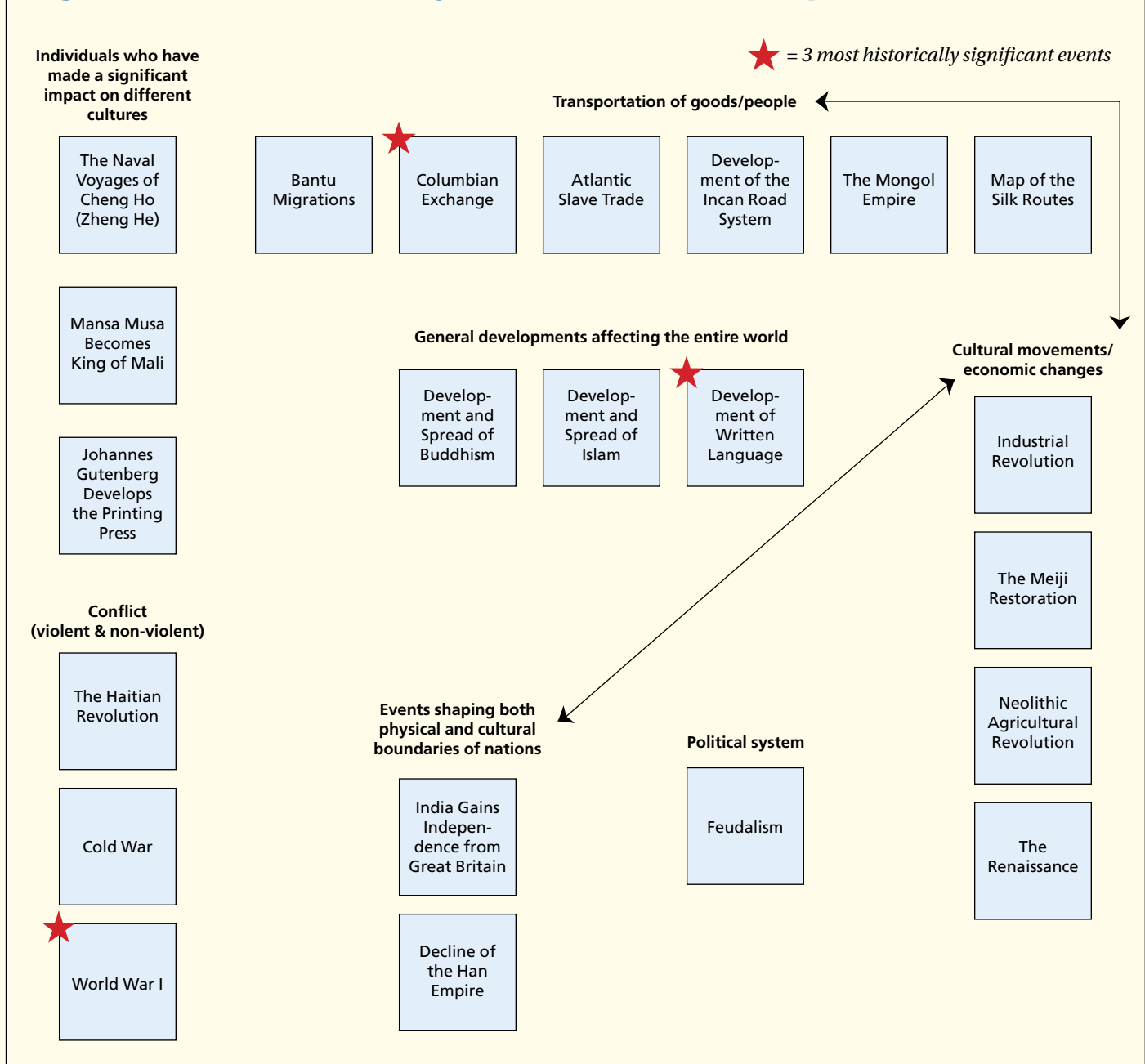
connections between world historical events for their students. For example, a novice pre-service teacher explained that she would “say what feudalism is, and use the Meiji Restoration as an example, but I don’t know how I’d do that.”<sup>4</sup>

So, what are we to make of this peek into how world history teachers constructed historical and pedagogical meaning for themselves and their students? It is important to acknowledge that all the teachers attempted to connect

events to avoid the “one-darn-thing-after-another” pit that threatens to swallow all history instruction. Also, the teachers did find ways to sort and group all the historical events so that no event stood alone. Thus, all the teachers demonstrated a modicum of factual knowledge of events and an understanding of the types of events.

However, the experienced world history teachers went beyond factual and categorical knowledge of events. They drew on

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



understandings of relationships of events across time and space, or at least were able to speculate about such relationships in action. Explicitly situating events in their respective historical places, these teachers used global, interregional, and regional scales as well as historical categories to link and nest the events, demonstrating multiple connections and suggesting complicated understandings of changes over time and space. Thus, the experienced world history teachers were able to weave together events to tell coherent stories with cross-regional comparisons and connections to larger global patterns.

Certainly, historical content knowledge mattered in this task, but so did knowing

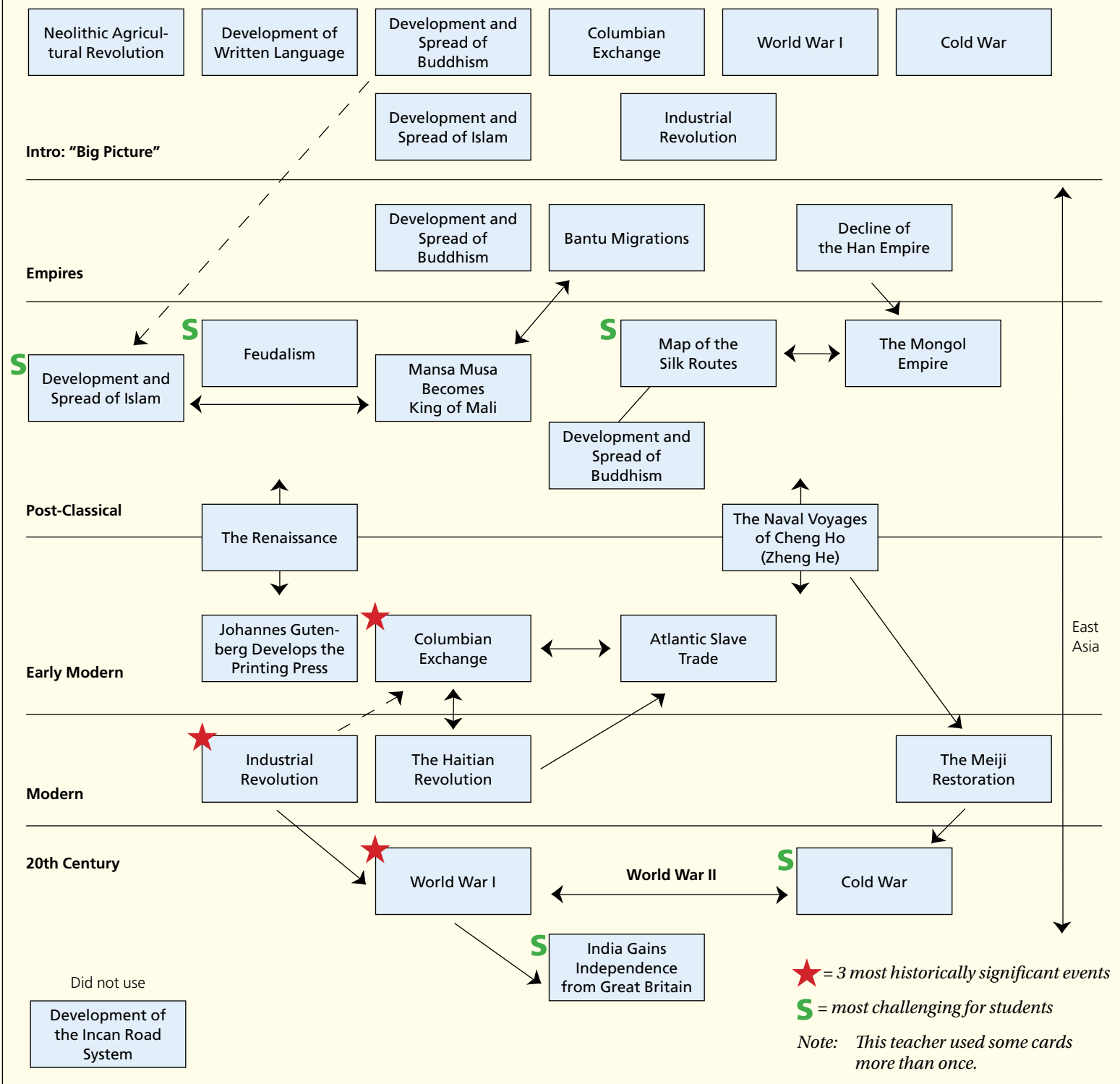
the processes of making comparative or cross-regional connections across wide expanses of time and space. The teachers with the most experience with both world history content and world history pedagogy developed the most complicated and useful maps. However, it did not appear to be simply the teachers' number of years teaching or the number of history courses they took that made the difference. The key difference 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 of the experienced

world history teachers 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). Thus, he used cards to create an introductory "big picture" unit that spanned from the Agricultural Revolution to the Cold War, and then reused and reconnected the cards as he planned instruction.

It seems, then, that beyond the type of history courses typically taken by history majors, history teachers need courses and professional development that focus on teaching and learning world history on a

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



global scale, offering the knowledge and skills needed to create coherent and flexible organizational schemes for the history of the world. 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. World history teachers not only need multiple pictures of historical events, but also must be able to make connections between and among them for themselves and their students. In historian Emmanuel Ladurie's terms, world history teachers need to be both parachutists (able to see

the big picture) and truffle hunters (able to find the most salient facts).<sup>5</sup> Pre- and in-service professional development should help teachers both float over the temporal-spatial landscape to see historical facts at differing scales and put their noses to the ground to dig for important details. □

(Endnotes on page 38)

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### Pedagogical Content Knowledge

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#### Endnotes

1. Robert Floden and Marco Meniketti, "Research on the Effects of Coursework in the Arts and Sciences and in the Foundations of Education," in *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*, ed. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kenneth M. Zeichner (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 261–308.
2. Robert B. Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, "Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History," *History Teacher* 38, no. 2 (2005): 241–272; and Sean Cavanagh, "World History and Geography Gain Traction in Class," *Education Week* 26, no. 28 (March 21, 2007): 10.
3. Lauren McArthur Harris, "Building Coherence in World History: A Study of Instructional Tools and Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).
4. Harris, "Building Coherence in World History," 242.
5. Although historians have often quoted Ladurie's description of historians as either parachutists or truffle hunters, we have never been able to find the place where Ladurie either wrote or said this. Recently, however, J. H. Elliott reported that Ladurie urged Elliott to cite him as the source of these distinctions: "with confidence." J. H. Elliott, *Spain, Europe, and the Wider World, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

### Common Core for Teaching

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can be harnessed for productive collective work.

In addition to high-leverage practices, we need to identify the content knowledge most important to competent beginning teaching and find ways to articulate professional orientations and commitments. Although instructional practice should be at the center, a common core for teaching practice would include explicit learning goals that encompass the range of skills, knowledge, understandings, orientations, and commitments that underlie responsible teaching. An important aspect of the curriculum for learning to teach would be the special kinds of content knowledge needed for teaching.<sup>14</sup>

Teaching is always about teaching *something*. Although the lack of a common curriculum in the United States has often discouraged teacher educators from focusing beginners' training on any particular academic content, the advent of the Common Core State Standards makes it possible to identify specific instructional practices, and specific topics and texts within school subject areas, that could serve as the foci of a redesigned professional curriculum for learning to teach responsibly. One way to approach choosing this content is to think again in terms of what is "high leverage" for beginning teachers. "High-leverage content" comprises those texts, topics, ideas, and skills

in each school subject area that are essential for a beginning teacher to know well. High-leverage content is foundational to the ideas and skills of the K–12 curricula in this country, is taught in some form or another across most published textbooks and curricula, and appears frequently. In addition, high-leverage content is fundamental to students' learning and often causes difficulty if not taught well. It also is often known only superficially by prospective teachers, or is entirely new to them.\* Examples of high-leverage content in elementary mathematics, for example, might include place value; computational procedures with whole numbers, decimals, and fractions; and mathematical explanation and representation. In secondary English language arts, it could include writing a coherent essay, and reading and analyzing *Romeo and Juliet* and *Invisible Man*.

With a practice-focused curriculum for learning to teach, prospective teachers would learn to use specific, high-leverage practices to teach specific, high-leverage content, much of it derived from the Common Core State Standards. They would also learn how to enact professional norms and commitments in the context of instruction (not just to talk about them). Although the full curriculum would vary in some ways from program to program, the focus on high-leverage practices and content would not. Our field has shied away from this kind of common core curriculum for new teachers for decades, with troubling results. There has never been a better time to change than now.

**W**e hear a great deal about how much more respected and supported teaching is in other countries than in the United States. Here, teaching is paradoxically both romanticized and disdained. More important, though, is that teaching is broadly underestimated and teacher education, both "traditional" and "alternative," is the object of significant criticism. Demanding that the public respect teachers or defending the status quo, however, will not lead to improved systems for the development of responsible instructional practice.

Our goal is to support the demanding

\*This definition of high-leverage content derives from the work of the Mathematics Methods Planning Group at the University of Michigan School of Education.