

On Tour in the U.S. West with the World history Survey

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ABSTRACT

The World history Survey can be taught in conjunction with a domestic U.S. travel experience to underscore the thematic organization of World history. This article and syllabus examines such a World history course, carried out over three weeks and 5,300 miles of travel in the U.S. West.

KEY WORDS

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During June and the beginning of July of 2011 I joined Dr. Jeffrey Bremer to teach fifteen students world history by investigating sites of interest and places in the United States West, but in the context of world history. In the process of visiting some of the most beautiful North American landscapes available and developing our understanding and appreciation of connections in world history, we covered over 5,300 miles from Texas to Montana and back with two vans of undergraduate history and social studies teaching majors.

Our extended “field trip” had several primary goals. In tough financial times, the push to provide affordable educational experiences for students chafes against the pull from the job market to produce graduates with experiential depth. Therefore, we wanted to give students a “study abroad” experience that was both affordable and educational. For the cost of airfare to

just one international location (\$650 for twenty-one days), we provided our students with an opportunity to think thematically about their own nation's relationship to global historical and environmental processes originated in / or related to areas around the world.

As instructors in a southern, regional, state university where many of the students come from lower middle-class homes and are themselves first-generation college students, we felt it was important for students to understand the position of their own nation in relation to the world. Indeed, of the twelve students on the trip, at least eight had never been out of east Texas and the immediate bordering states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Standing with students at a cowboy camp in Canyonlands National Park or on the edge of the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana, gave them an opportunity to see beyond their own local concerns. While flying students to Morocco or Ghana might help students understand those regions, it also has the potential to enhance false ideas of exoticism and "otherness," while the World history survey, using global themes in the United States, had the benefit of letting students appreciate their connection to the world while remaining grounded in the familiar environs of their "own country."

Finally, as the job market for secondary and post-secondary education opportunities dwindles for history majors, we introduced students to vocational options in the history profession. Living history, local history, forest service, public history, heritage tourism, and resource management may also be under-funded, but having those options laid out in a direct manner has value.

The following is an outline of the Course for the World history portion of the class with commentary:

Course Description

This course surveys major thematic developments in World history from the Neolithic Revolution (the rise of agriculture) to Globalization (the greater interconnectedness of all areas of the world). Models of study will include concepts of meta geography (how our world view is shaped by mapping), trade, cross cultural interaction, commodity chains, world systems, diasporas, and biological exchange. Particular attention is paid to the pre-Conquest Americas and the Afro-Eurasian complex (the so-called "Old World"). Topics include the rise and maintenance of cities, human interaction with the physical environment and animal world, comparative studies of empires, colonialism, neo-colonialism, exploration, modernization, and globalization. This course emphasizes an ability to find thematic connections over time and between places and cultures.

Required Texts

I selected texts that emphasized variety and comparison:

James O. Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). ISBN 978-0803270596

Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World that Trade Created* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Second Edition, 2006). ISBN 978-0-7656-1709-5

Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004). ISBN 0-609-80964-4

Other readings:

I also carried in the van a variety of general history text books as well as books on topics like agriculture, water, exploration, and religion so that students could have a handy reference set as they considered ideas for their journals.

Grading Criteria:

Students were graded on participation as well as thought journals where they documented events of the trip, made connections to the readings we discussed, and generated their own ideas or questions about the trip or topics. Essay exams and fill in the blank exams upon returning from the travel portion of the course evaluated student learning. Essays had to demonstrate an ability to find thematic connections over time and between places and cultures. I also allowed students to take the essay exam portion with their journals, which encouraged better journaling during the trip.

Program Learning Outcomes:

Like many university history departments, our courses had to show that they matched with established program learning outcomes. These are the PLOs that best matched our goals for the course.

1. The student will evaluate the role of the historian in society.
2. The student will assess the significance of historical events/phenomena and analyze their historical contexts.
3. The student will interpret evidence found within primary sources and place those sources within their appropriate historical context.

Itinerary and Topics for the travel portion of the class:

I would like to dedicate the bulk of the discussion to the destinations visited reached during the trip as well as topics discussed at those locations.

Day 1: Battle of Washita, Oklahoma. During a visit to the battlefield Dr. Bremer discussed variations in Native American policy by the United States. Following that, I led a discussion on comparative problems of empires and dealing with their “conquered” peoples – focusing on primary source readings on Assyria, the Neo-Babylonians, and Persia. This approach allowed students not to see the United States’ interaction with Native Americans as a singular moment of exceptional history but as one in a string of conquerors resolving the problems of empire.

Day 2: Santa Fe, New Mexico. When the U.S. focus was on the Mexican American War, the World portion of this class focused on Spanish settlement of North America (a discussion led after visiting the living history ranch of Las Golondrinas) as well as the the Gorras Blancas rebellion that came after seizure of land from Mexican citizens. In addition, the trading nature of Santa Fe was broached and students were encouraged to focus on various forms of trade and exchange over the next few days. We talked comparatively about other trade roads and routes such as the Silk Road, Saharan caravan routes, and internal trade in India. This set students up to discuss ideas of global trade that we would see in other areas of the trip.

Days 3-4: Chaco Canyon National Park. Native American agriculture was the focus of the U.S. history portion of the class, while my discussions after hiking and visiting Chaco focused on the the rise of agriculture as well as drawing on lecture material from Jack Harlan’s *Crops and Man* and the questions he poses regarding why people might choose to engage in agriculture over hunting and gathering. After visiting the sites and hearing time and again that the entire area was built without wheels and contained no writing, we were able to engage in a fruitful discussion on the nature of civilization. Students also took advantage of visiting scholars in Chaco who lectured on the religious nature of the complex as well as the night sky program that introduced them to archaeoastronomy.

Day 5: Tours of the Mesa Verde national park for both the U.S. and World portion of the course focused on the Columbian exchange and the importance of plants from the Americas. The World portion of the course also discussed the importance of geography and climate in developing resources by comparing farming techniques and approaches in Mesa Verde (as presented by the site’s interpretative material) with the interaction of people with their environment in Andean civilizations presented by myself.

Day 6: While kivas in Chaco and Mesa Verde led to fruitful discussions of the role of religion in the Americas and in other world civilizations, we made an unscheduled stop in Monticello, UT in front of a Mormon (LDS) temple to discuss the role of religion in colonization. I incorporated my research on religious colonies in Mexico with our discussion of Mormon settlement of the west and the presentation in Chaco on that area as a ritual center. We also talked about temple cultures and the centering nature of sacred space in cosmography. For some of the students this was a portion of the course that upset them, as Mormonism was seen by many of the students as a “cult.” I actually found this a positive experience as some students had to face within

themselves their own discomfort and decide how to respond as professional historians rather than students with a personal agenda.

Day 7: While hiking in Canyonlands to the confluence of the Colorado and Green rivers we held an interesting comparative discussion with students about John Wesley Powell, Ibn Battuta, and Demid Pyanda and the general role of rivers and explorers in history – not only as “discovering” new territory, but also as historical sources and their role in national identity formation.

Day 8: The railroad town of Rock Springs, Wyoming served as the perfect location for my counterpart in Western U.S. History to discuss railroads and for me to discuss the Chinese global diaspora. Students were able to draw direct lines between the treatment of Chinese migrants in Indonesia with their situation in Wyoming in the nineteenth century (the Rock Springs Massacre of 1885) and the slaughter of Chinese merchants and laborers in Torreon, Mexico, in 1911. It also led to a lively discussion of transportation in World history. Many of the students had not considered that rail expansion in the United States was just one of a myriad of rail projects taking place globally during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (I mentioned Mexico and Russia in particular).

Day 9: While the Museum of the Mountain Man in Pinedale, Wyoming set up my colleague of the U.S. West, it was also a great way to think comparatively about the fur trade and Asia (the Russian Far East and China) as well as the importance of North American furs in the global fur trade. From there we could discuss the scarcity of fur-bearing animals in one area that would drive exploration, commercial expansion, and the transformation of the landscape with their absence, with particular attention paid to beavers. *The World That Trade Created* has a chapter that deals with the Chinese fur trade and explicitly mentions the North American trade as just one cog in a global machine of fur.

Day 10 and 11: Yellowstone National Park saw a shift in emphasis to evaluating the role of history as presented in national tourist destinations. However, using the Sheep Eater Shoshone’s decision not to adopt the horse, students were led in a discussion of animal power (a la Jared Diamond) and the definitions of civilization, with comparisons to the Inca, Aztecs, and what we’d seen at Chaco. We considered previous definitions of civilization that relied on tools like the wheel or developments like writing. From here we entered in to a fruitful discussion of teleology in history and the assumptions traditionally made about civilization and technological development.

Day 12: The focus of the expedition shifted to resource extraction – particularly mining – as we made stops in former Montana territorial capital Virginia City and Butte, Montana, home of the Berkeley Pit and North America’s answer to the mines of Potosi, Bolivia.

Virginia City was heavily affected by hydraulic mining, and the river valley near the town remains under mineral exploitation at present, though the town itself has become primarily a

tourist destination. This visit was a good starting point to discuss environmental degradation, resource extraction, and the transition to the service economy. The destination has the additional benefit of a historical site dedicated to an African-American woman in Virginia City, allowing us to discuss the African diaspora.

In Butte, standing on the edge of the mining pit filling with water (and the second largest superfund clean-up site in the United States) we were able to discuss the pros and cons of resource extraction in the world: from the sulfur mines of East Java to the history of silver in Bolivia and the current rush for lithium to build portable electronic device batteries. From here we began a discussion of rare earth mineral uses and concerns about preservation in western and southern Africa where rare earth minerals are found. This was followed up on the morning of day 13 with a walking tour of Butte, Montana's red light district, Chinese neighborhood, and a discussion of human trafficking and labor. At the end of the trip, students commented that the stops in Butte were the most surprising and instructive of the trip.

Day 13: Lewis and Clark (with our stop in the Bitterroot Valley and Missoula, Montana) were the topic of the U.S. west, while the World history portion discussed the role of interpreters and made a comparison between Sacajawea and Malinche as well as a general discussion of interpreters and women in the colonization and exploration process.

Day 14: The visit to the St. Ignatius mission in St. Ignatius, Montana, revived the discussion of religion and introduced ideas of syncretism and the malleable nature of Christianity. The mission not only houses beautiful Italian-style murals painted by the missionizing Jesuits, but it also houses a large portrayal of Jesus and the Sacred Heart, with Jesus depicted as a Native American Chief. Beside that is a photo of the Virgin Mary as an indigenous woman with the baby Jesus in a cradle board. Other imagery and placement – such as the tabernacle of the Host being a tipi – all contribute to a starting point for discussion the nature of religious practice in history. We also compared the spread of Hellenistic influences into Buddhism as reflected in the art of Central Asia and depictions of the Buddha. I carried photo copies of examples from Central Asia, China, and Japan for this discussion.

Day 15: Day fifteen was a day devoted to indigenous peoples with a stop at the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana. We also visited the Greenfield's Irrigation District in Fairfield, Montana. While my colleague discussed *Cadillac Desert*, this arid high prairie desert plain awash in fields of barley was a great place to discuss the transformation of global landscapes through dams and irrigation projects. In addition, as the town bills itself as the "Malting Barley Capital of America," we took a moment to discuss the role of beer in ancient civilizations such as Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Day 16: This leg of the trip saw the revival of the discussion of explorers and in the introduction of the importance of rivers in World history as we arrived in Great Falls, Montana, and visited the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center. An excellent facility with helpful staff, students found

it easy to focus on Lewis and Clark, and the setting overlooking the Missouri River made an perfect way to discuss the importance of rivers for navigation and agriculture. In addition, from the visitor's center one can see the remains of the Anaconda Copper Company smelter and hydroelectric dam built on the opposite shore. Students can see a direct link between exploration and the arrival of resource processing, and I used this to enter into a discussion of areas such as the Amazon basin and Siberia where exploration leads to entrance into greater world systems of extraction and production of timber, cattle, or mineral wealth.

Day 17: Our scheduled visit to Little Bighorn on the anniversary of the battle was poorly timed (it was far too crowded), but it allowed students to see the excitement surrounding the event, as well as getting introduced to large numbers of Native Americans that had come to celebrate the battle. The visit to the battle ground accompanied a discussion of *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, and students led a discussion of the book, comparing the causes, course, and consequences of key engagements in South Africa and North America during periods of imperial expansion. As we discussed colonialism and military technology, the students could reference ideas, sites, and weapons discussed in the tour of the battlefield and visitor's center.

Day 18: The oil and cattle country of central Wyoming made for a perfect discussion of not only commodities and commodity chains in history, but also the role of agricultural workers such as cowboys. A discussion by the historian of the U.S. West on cowboys led to a fruitful discussion of *gauchos* and *vaqueros* in the Spanish tradition as well as cattle cultures around the world. Because we had touched on cowboy culture in New Mexico, students already had a basic understanding of the Spanish cowboy system.

Day 19: The National Trails Museum in Casper, Wyoming, along with trail sites such as Independence Rock made for exciting and innovative places to discuss mass migrations in World history. Using a map of global migrations, students were interested in comparing not only the size of migrations, but also seeing the "Westward" movement of people of European, African, and Asian descent as part of a larger global pattern instead of an isolated incident. *World that Trade Created* also offered a comparative chapter on the movement of Chinese internal colonists, prompting students to not see westward expansion in the United States as unique.

Day 20: Our final historical stop brought us to southern Colorado.

At Bent's Fort near La Junta, Colorado we discussed the Santa Fe Trail, where the role of empire in facilitating trade and the exchange of ideas came alive for students. In addition, the broad, flat expanse of the southeastern Colorado prairie made for a perfect discussion of *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. While my counterpart discussed herding culture, I added an oral introduction to Pekka Hamalainen's *Comanche Empire*, and made connections to Weatherford's very readable book on themes of conquest, trade, cities and nomads (with added discussion of Ibn Kaldun), and the relationship between humans, horses, herds, and grass

calories. While these sounds like broad topics to cover, given that we had hours in the van and on-site to discuss, as well as meal time and fire-side chats, the material was easily covered.

The Return to Chalk and Talk

The course covered a five week summer term. While three weeks were spent in travel, one week was spent in the class room getting ready for the trip, and one week was spent in the classroom after the travel evaluating our trip and making more connections.

For the introduction to the course, students were assigned a list of readings for discussion from online sources, the university library, department library, and works assigned for purchase for the course. The readings and material were designed to consider the question of periodization in history, thematic and real links between the United States and the world, and the problems of empire. The final topic on empire is a useful tool that allows for a discussion of economics, infrastructure, religion, ethnicity, and identity.

The return to Texas included four days of classroom instruction on more specific items we had not covered with much depth on the road. These topics included: South Asian religion and empires, the rise of Islam, industrialization / modernization vs. westernization, technological revolutions, and political revolutions. Because my course was a survey course, these were topics that needed to be touched on but had not been adequately addressed in the travel portion of the course.

Reflections on the Trip

From my perspective as the instructor, I found the course enjoyable for several reasons. First, I was able to spend more time discussing ideas with students in a relaxed setting that encouraged conversation. Second, I could show in real-world situations the consequences of decisions made by those in the past. Land and water use, mineral extraction, diaspora communities, mestizaje, colonization, religious conflict – these are all processes that are pertinent to world history and that left solid, demonstrable footprints on the U.S. West. Finally, I could push back at the idea that the United States somehow exists outside of the history of the world. In the thematic classroom of the open road, there was no “West versus the rest” or “world without us [U.S.]” problem. As we talked about thematic ideas in many areas of the U.S. West and compared them to other areas in the world, patterns of class, environmental interaction, trade, and the movement of people became clear. As Mark Bloch often argued, comparative histories don’t necessarily need a direct connection to reveal patterns or prompt the student to ask why differences or similarities exist.

Student feedback on the trip was overwhelmingly positive. Here is a sampling of some of the student comments:

Being in places like Chaco Canyon and the Nez Perce memorial site [Big Hole National Battlefield] made the stories of the people we were studying seem so much more real than just words on a page.

Thinking of things in such a broad, interconnected sense was challenging – I had to think beyond myself and the way I had always been taught history (white/Euro- and American-centric, largely positivity without the liberation that truth can bring).

I am preparing to move to Utah for grad school (from Texas), and I'm not certain I would be willing to make such a drastic change had I not experienced that trip.

The ability to hike and spend time in places that have historical importance really adds to the learning environment of the trip. It was almost as if we were experiencing history, not just learning about it.

It seemed that my comprehension and learning was amplified due to the fact that the learning experience was 24/7. I believe that since we were completely immersed in the class, I took more away from it than I ever would have in a normal classroom.

But there were negative aspects, as well. Prompting me to consider how I might build the course differently. One student pointed out the following:

There was a large amount of reading to do while traveling, and at times this proved difficult. Personally, I struggle reading while riding in the car. I get motion sickness easily, so I did not get much reading done in the multiple hours we spent driving.

Instead of assigning three books, I might reduce the reading load to *World That Trade Created* and instead have each student select a single monograph from a list that they would present and discuss at each site. This was the approach used by my U.S. West counterpart, and I think his strategy was insightful. However, *The World That Trade Created* became indispensable to the course, used near silver mines, railroad towns, fur and mountain man museums, and migration trails. While my U.S. counterpart was discussing factors that shaped the U.S. West, I was able to use Pomeranz and Topik to show how those movements were just part of a larger context.

Another student made the following comment:

Sometimes, it was difficult to keep groups I was unfamiliar with straight – I swear I essentially read *The Dust Rose Like Smoke* three times just to keep the Sioux and the Zulu straight in my mind.

With mobile technology being what it is, I might include PDF maps that students could access on their mobile devices. Indeed, a more tech savvy professor might create an integrated classroom that happens both on the road and on line with resources, quizzes, and presentations available via mobile devices. These tools might help students keep different groups “straight” in their minds.

From a practical standpoint, this course is easily adaptable for those that might object to the approach we took. While we chose to camp, limit hotel stays to areas where snow was falling (Montana and Wyoming had significant snow in areas we visited in June), and drive our own vans to hold down costs, universities and students with more funds might choose to charter a bus, sleep in more hotels, and stick to more accessible sites. In most of the areas we visited, we rarely found ourselves in places that RVs or large camper trailers could not travel as well – a university bus would not have difficulty for the trip.

I also feel that professors could engage in regional variation. Instead of Mesa Verde and Cahokia, professors in the Midwest and South could discuss ideas of comparative civilization at mound civilization sites. Certainly the same issues of conquered Native Americans in New England could be applied to a discussion of global conquered peoples. Military history or the intellectual history of revolutions would work well at areas such as Independence Hall or Gettysburg. While part of our goal was to remove our students from their own region, another course might choose not to engage in that goal and instead find sites in their region for which they can think comparatively.

Conclusion

The experience left a lasting impression on both of the instructors and the students in the course, as well. While the course was our university’s general World history survey, the topic was best suited for questions of humanity’s interaction with animals and natural resources in the light of economic systems. As with other study abroad trips, the students formed a close bond that saw them remain fast friends well after the end of the trip. In addition, we also created a blog of the trip (<http://sfahistorytravel.blogspot.com>) that was promoted by our dean on the college web page and the department home page, resulting in newspaper coverage and publicity for the University. This experience was a win for the administration, and most importantly, a win for the students that participated. An enriching and rewarding experience, traveling in the United States to teach thematic World history is an affordable and effective way to engage students.