



Using Formative Assessment to Develop Students' Historical Thinking Skills

Skill Focus: Periodization

Introduction to Periodization

The novelty and scale of world history help explain why fundamental issues — such as the best ways of dividing it into periods — remain a topic of debate. There is no clear consensus on how to organize or periodize the material covered in world history. Such a consensus may emerge eventually, but there are still real obstacles to address. For example, the first states emerged in the Americas approximately 2,000 years after states had emerged in Afro-Eurasia. Such chronological diversity makes it impossible to discuss the topic of state formation within a single historical period.

These difficulties explain why different world history textbooks and syllabi emphasize different themes and adopt different periodizations; these differences can make teaching world history seem more difficult. However, if these differences are approached not just as challenges but as opportunities, they provide many ways to help students understand that history is an account of the past constructed by historians — each of whom may see the past differently.

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate and construct models of historical periodization. Historians use periodization to categorize events into discrete blocks and identify turning points. It is important that students recognize that the choice of specific dates can privilege one narrative, region or group over another and that changing periodization can change a historical narrative. Moreover, they should understand the particular circumstances and contexts in which individual historians work and write shape their interpretations and modeling of past events.

Students in a world history course often have a difficult time accepting periodization as an artificial construct. They tend to expect that historians set time periods without bias. Because many students do not recognize how historical interpretation is constructed, the notion that time periods also are created by historians according to analytical purposes can be confusing.

Despite this lack of understanding, they may still take issue with periodization. Students come into any history course with prior experiences with history through their families, communities and popular media. This background knowledge influences how they might conceptualize time. For example, students who feel connected to the history of the civil rights movement might periodize the 20th century in ways that vary from how many American history textbooks approach it. When history students encounter periodizations that don't fit what they've learned at home or from popular media, they might see the periodization in the textbook or AP curriculum as exclusionary. These students might appreciate that recognizing periodization as an artificial construct means that historians' schemes can be challenged.



Although the scale of world history makes periodization somewhat more unwieldy than those presented for American and European history, students in a world history course can gain a lot from recognizing that historical periods are analytical conveniences and not facts in themselves.

Activity: Examining a Summative Assessment

Directions:

In pairs, examine the two sample items below. The first is a summative assessment that could be used given the revised curriculum framework. The second is a sample item for the revised (2011-12) course. Identify how each question assesses the skill of periodization. What are the differences in approach, if any? Write your thoughts below.

An existing summative assessment that could be used given the revised Curriculum Framework:

Which of the following most clearly differentiates the 16th century from the previous period in world history?

Note: Full commentary for the skills and content assessed by this item appear on page 95 of the Appendix.

- A. Establishment of nation-states in the Americas
- B. Extension of sugar production to the Americas
- C. Use of steamships
- D. Interest in the Asian spice trade
- E. Existence of slave trade

Sample question for the revised exam:

Which of the following changes best justifies the claim that the late 1400s mark the beginning of a new period in world history?

- A. The rise of the Aztec and Inca Empires
- B. The economic recovery in Afro-Eurasia after the Black Death
- C. The incorporation of the Americas into a global network of exchange
- D. The emergence of new religious movements



Activity: Experiencing a Formative Assessment

The goal of this activity is to evaluate whether 600 C.E. or 700 C.E. is a better starting date for the postclassical period.

Directions:

Build consensus on the following question as a group: **What makes and event “significant”?** Consider the chronological and geographical extent of the effects of the event. Now divide into groups of three or four. Look at each of the events in Set 1 and quickly write down as many of the **effects** as you can (this should just be a brainstorm, not a comprehensive analysis).

You should also identify the **type** of each effect, for example: political, social, economic, environmental or cultural. Some suggestions for the effects are in parentheses, but you should also come up with suggestions of your own. Note how long it took for the effects to become apparent. Keep in mind what else is going on at the time of each event, including what was happening in the Americas.

[**Note:** This formative assessment assumes that students will have some familiarity with the events listed. If students do not know enough about the effects, they can review their notes or use textbooks and other resource materials in class to identify them (presented in this way, the assessment could serve as an introduction to the postclassical period).]

Now, use the annotations you created in the first part of this activity to **order the events** in terms of significant impact from 1 to 10. Label the most significant event “1” and the least significant “10.” [Note: The goal here is not to create a set-in-stone hierarchy; the ranking gives students at the high school level a method to quickly consider the significance of events in relation to one another. You could also have them label the events “high significance,” “medium significance” or “low significance.”]

Set 1 (dates close to 600 C.E.)

- _____ 476 End of Roman Empire in west (political effect is the splitting of the Roman Empire)
- _____ 527–565 Justinian and Theodora rule Byzantine Empire; bubonic plague epidemic in the Byzantine Empire; silk industry began in the Byzantine Empire (economic effect is the continuation of trade with Asian countries)
- _____ 550 Collapse of Gupta Empire (political effect was the end of somewhat centralized control in South Asia)
- _____ 560 Height of Funan kingdom in Indochina (economic effect is the expansion of trade among merchants in East and Southeast Asia)
- _____ 500 Trade route developed through the Strait of Malacca (economic effect is the expansion of trade between merchants in East and Southeast Asia)
- _____ 600 Teotihuacan at height, Mayan city-states in Mesoamerica, and

Tiwanaku and Wari states in the Peruvian highlands (cultural effect is the development of record-keeping systems and architectural styles that persist)

608 Beginning of Tang Dynasty; Buddhism flourished in China (economic effect is the expansion of trade along the Silk Road, and the cultural effect is the development of another school of Buddhism)

629 Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zhuang traveled the Silk Road to India (cultural effect is the collection of original Buddhist texts for translation in China)

634 Beginning of Islamic conquests of western Asia and decline of Sassanid Empire and parts of Byzantine Empire (political effect is the creation of the caliphate)

661 Beginning of Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus (demonstrated strength of Islamic conquests from Arabia)

Repeat Steps 2 and 3 to rank the following events closer to 700 C.E. We will then discuss whether 600 C.E. or 700 C.E. is a better starting date for the postclassical period.

Set 2 (dates close to 700 C.E.)

668 Silla victory in Korea (This centralized political system set the standard of "bone ranks" for all later Korean imperial governments.)

700 Anasazi culture in North America (The agricultural success of the Anasazi proved an environmental adaptation that lasted until the 12th century.)

711 Muslim conquest of Spain and transfer of citrus crops and water management technologies (The cultural and agricultural changes brought by Muslim rule in Spain affected much of southern Europe up to the present.)

710 Nara established as Japanese capital (The architecture demonstrates that the Japanese mastered Chinese building techniques and culturally adopted Mahayana Buddhism in the Todaiji temple.)

732 Battle of Tours marked the end of northern expansion of Islamic conquests in Europe (demonstrated military effectiveness as key to rise of Carolingian)

750 Abbasid Caliphate began (demonstrated the effectiveness of the caliphate as an Islamic political system)

750 Merchants expanded the trans-Saharan routes (using camels and thereby connected the Ghana Empire to the Islamic world)

751 Battle of Talas River in Central Asia (transferred Chinese paper-making technology to Muslim world)



Discussion:

- Based on your evaluations of the two lists of events, do you think 600 C.E. or 700 C.E. is a better starting date for the postclassical period? State your reasons here.

Questions Teachers Could Ask Students Following the Formative Assessment:

1. Were political, economic, social, environmental and/or cultural effects the most important to consider when determining the beginning and end of a time period? Did the way you have learned history in the past — mostly about political effects — affect how you decided what was important to consider? Or, did your own interests, perhaps cultural changes, affect your decision about the types of effects?
2. How much does a historian's perspective on the importance of one region or hemisphere over another affect how she or he organizes world history into time periods? For example, did you decide to keep or discard the events in the Americas when you picked 600 C.E. or 700 C.E. as the better starting date for a time period?
3. Discuss the reasons why world historians usually do not select single events to mark the beginning of a time period. (Hint: World history is usually thematic and analyzes global processes that affect more than one region at a time.)
4. How many events around a date would be enough to select that as a beginning date? How do you think historians decide enough changes occurred to make a new time period?
5. Look at the periodization used by the AP World History Curriculum Framework or by your textbook. Are those periodizations focused more on selecting events that have short-term or long-term effects? Discuss some of the possible reasons. (If the students are familiar with David Christian's Big History approach, it might be useful to share one of his timelines showing how small the postclassical period appears.)
6. Do the events you ranked as more important convey a view of history as progressive (effects of events show progress in human societies) or as cyclical (events and their effects follow a predictable and repeating pattern)? Or is there another approach to history embedded in your rankings?

Discussion:

- Which of these questions would you consider to be particularly useful in gauging student knowledge and why?
- What other questions might you ask?

Activity Wrap-Up:

- What is the value of having students rank two different sets of dates?
- What other historical thinking skills did this assessment address?
- What themes did this assessment address?
- What key concepts did this assessment address?
- How could you use this formative assessment in your classroom currently?
- How might you modify this assessment to meet the needs of your students?



Modification for Lesson

- Dates could be printed on separate index cards, and students could be assigned one card each to make a short argument for the importance of the effects of that event in world history. Students should determine the criteria for what makes an event important. For example, they might consider whether political events are more important than social ones. As students listen to one another's arguments, they evaluate the events, either on an individual handout or as a class on the blackboard, and then come to a consensus as a class about how useful the date 600 C.E. is as a beginning date for the postclassical period. It might be difficult to come to a consensus, but the arguments that students make and the evidence they use to persuade their peers are exactly what should help them see how periodizations are interpretations by historians, not preset facts.

Skill Focus: Interpretation

Introduction to Interpretation: How Students Can Engage with Multiple Meanings of the Past

Because historical narratives are influenced by the societies and cultures in which they are written, world historians must be alert to differences in interpretation and take care not to impose the values and viewpoints of their own societies on the different societies they are studying. World historians must also keep in mind that their own interpretations may shift over time as they consider various elements of different sources.

Historiography is the study of historians' interpretations of the past and their methods of inquiry. It is necessary for AP students to regularly engage in historiographical thinking, to be able to describe, analyze, evaluate and create diverse interpretations of the past — as revealed through primary and secondary historical sources — through analysis of evidence, reasoning, contexts, points of view and frames of reference.

If history is understood as change over time, then historiography can be described as historians' changing ideas about what's important to understand about the past. On one level, historiography is the history of historians: Who wrote which books? When did they write the books? Why were they interested in one set of topics rather than another? Taken more broadly, it also the history of the discipline itself: an investigation about how historians have framed questions, how those questions have changed, how interpretations have changed and why some research topics have gotten more attention than others.

One reason for the increased emphasis on skills and skill development in the revised AP World History curriculum is to encourage students to engage with the subject of history as a way of thinking and a process of problem solving, rather than as an exercise in memorization. Helping students appreciate historiography can facilitate their learning; it provides intellectual scaffolding for a range of complex issues, structures comparisons across time and space, and foregrounds history



as an investigation instead of as a compilation of facts. Introducing the tools of historiography can make your class more comprehensible to students while it requires only minor adjustments to existing lessons.

What's more, historiography is central to the ways in which history is conceptualized by historians themselves. As historian Marnie Hughes-Warrington notes, "Quite often, historiography is treated as an add-on or as an ancillary to historical studies. It is assumed to be the preserve of advanced undergraduate or graduate students ... These views of historiography as supplementary are mistaken, because every activity undertaken in the course of historical research or teaching is shaped by assumptions about what history is and what it is for."¹

For centuries, the histories written by Herodotus and Thucydides were used by scholars to understand the intricacies of war and state-craft in the ancient Mediterranean world. Scholars' use of these classical-era texts has changed markedly in recent times, however. In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, these sources validated an approach to history that emphasized state-to-state politics, which was the predominant understanding of "history." Both authors also included detailed descriptions of "non-Greek" peoples — the societies around the Mediterranean and in central Asia that Greeks encountered when they left their archipelago. Herodotus is now claimed as the intellectual father of both history and anthropology in recognition of his attention to Greek politics and to the customs of foreign cultures. The ways in which scholars who lived long after Herodotus changed their claims about Herodotus's contributions to Western thought are one example of historiography.

1. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, "World History, and World Histories," *World History Connected* 3, no. 3 (2006).