

Helping Students Use World Historical Knowledge to Take a Stand on a Contemporary Issue: The Case of Genocide

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WORLD HISTORY has an important role to play in educating students for global citizenship.¹ The study of world history can arm students with the historical knowledge and competencies they need to investigate and reason about the global issues they will face as citizens. It can provide them with an understanding of historical antecedents to contemporary issues and the global and interregional relationships that have helped shape contemporary global problems.² Furthermore, world history has the potential to provide students with the global perspective to understand the diversity and commonalities of people's experiences across the world, and how decisions in one part of the globe have consequences elsewhere.³

However, students do not always come into classrooms equipped with the tools needed to effectively analyze and use historical information to reason about political issues and the world around them.⁴ Even students who are competent in extracting and regurgitating information found in texts may struggle to analyze, interpret, and use history in producing evidence-based oral and written arguments and explanations.⁵ This article examines a unit of instruction focused on helping students more effectively use world historical information to reason about and take a stand on

a global issue. Genocide served as the topic of the unit because of its key place in the modern world history narrative and the policy issues that continue to surround genocide today.⁶ The unit was planned, implemented, revised, and re-implemented in five tenth-grade Modern World History classrooms over the course of two years, with two different world history teachers providing instruction. Analysis of student work revealed the importance of providing explicit instruction aimed at helping students use historical knowledge to reason about contemporary issues, and instruction that helped students use historical knowledge to reason more effectively. Furthermore, instruction and analysis uncovered important considerations specific to teaching the concept of genocide.

Background

For the last several decades, the implications of globalization for citizenship have become a growing concern for scholars and educators.⁷ In our increasingly interconnected world, people argue that citizens must be equipped to understand the concept of universal human rights,⁸ diversity of perspectives across the globe,⁹ contemporary global issues,¹⁰ the dynamics of global relationships,¹¹ and connections between the local and global.¹² They must also be prepared for informed political action beyond the nation-state and for making decisions with an understanding of how their choices impact people in other parts of the globe.¹³ Despite these concerns, many schools struggle to develop a coherent program in global citizenship education¹⁴ and state standards overwhelmingly neglect to mandate it.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there is emerging evidence to suggest that students increasingly identify themselves as global citizens who are part of a world community and thus desire a global education.¹⁶

The subject of world history has the potential to play a central role in students' global citizenship education.¹⁷ The course itself is partly an outgrowth of globalization and increasing global awareness, and when studied with a global approach, can help students better understand global perspectives and draw connections between their local or national communities and the global community.¹⁸ Furthermore, world history affords students an opportunity to address the concept of universal human rights, which can serve as a foundation of global citizenship education.¹⁹

However, simply knowing world history content is not enough for global citizenship. In its fullest realization, global citizenship also entails a capacity for globally aware civic action and decision-making.²⁰ Students should be able to use their world historical knowledge to reason about and act upon global issues. However, wanting students to use historical information in political analysis and decision-making, and actually getting them to do it are two different things. Students may fail to even recognize history's usefulness, as scholars of history education often report that students perceive the subject to be little more than "one damn fact after another."²¹ This perceived uselessness could in turn impact students' engagement and achievement in their history courses,²² further preventing them from acquiring any usable knowledge of history in the first place.

The importance of usable knowledge in history has been a salient point in several recent studies. For example, an expert-novice study of political scientists and high school students revealed that historical information plays an important role for experienced political thinkers as they reason about contemporary political issues, but that their historical knowledge is made usable by having a narrative framework with an underlying periodization scheme, a sense of change over time, and an understanding of causation.²³ With such structured narratives, political thinkers use their historical knowledge to frame the problems they are studying, surfacing contextual factors and historical antecedents; support their positions on a political issue; and evaluate the historically grounded claims of others. Similarly, Stuart Foster, Rosalind Ashby, and Peter Lee argued that students who had "process-like" conceptions of the past—that is, a view of history as a process involving change and development—were more likely to invoke the past when grappling with an issue of present concern.²⁴

The idea of usable historical knowledge guided the design, implementation, and analysis of a unit on genocide for a tenth-grade modern world history course. Genocide is a concept germane to both world history and global citizenship education. In world history, scholars write about genocide's pervasive role in human history, pointing out that genocidal acts may have occurred as early as the Paleolithic Era and have taken place over time throughout all corners of the globe.²⁵ World historians' interest in the topic of genocide is made further evident by multiple articles and book reviews published in prominent world history journals like the *Journal of World*

History.²⁶ Moreover, genocide is a widely mandated topic in state world history standards, including among many of the most populous states in the nation.²⁷ Recently, a handful of states have even made the teaching of genocide in public schools a legal requirement.²⁸

The topic of genocide's relevance to global citizenship education is clear as well. Increasing concerns with global citizenship education arose partly in reaction to genocidal acts in the decades following World War II.²⁹ Further, scholars of genocide and global citizenship education argue that understanding of genocide among the citizenry is imperative if policymakers in a democratic society are to support laws and actions that will bring an end to genocidal acts.³⁰

For all of these reasons, helping students understand the history of genocide and then apply their knowledge as they investigate contemporary cases is an important part of the world history curriculum. This also demands, perhaps more than other instructional topics, careful and collaborative planning, systematic analysis, and sustained reflection. In the following section, I describe a unit on genocide that I designed in collaboration with a fellow tenth-grade world history teacher, including how we modified the unit year over year in response to analysis of student work. I then present a case for specific instructional elements of teaching an issue like genocide—elements that will equip students to apply their understanding of cases throughout history and to take a stand on cases around the world today.

Genocide Unit Design

I co-designed a unit on genocide for a tenth-grade modern world history course in collaboration with another modern world history teacher who also implemented the unit in his classes.³¹ This collaborative process allowed us to contribute our own unique knowledge to the project, carefully revise documents together, and engage in in-depth discussions about content and rationale.³² Because the teaching of genocide is so widely mandated, there is a wealth of resources that we could draw from while designing the unit.³³ During design, we were cognizant of genocide scholars' concerns that teachers may miss opportunities to address the full complexity of the topic of genocide, risking coverage at the expense of depth.³⁴ This is one reason that we taught the topic as a separate unit in our

classes, so that we could explore genocidal acts at particular moments in time while also looking at genocides across time.

Our goals for the unit on genocide were driven by research on how people use history to reason.³⁵ We wanted students to understand genocide from a historical perspective, and use their understanding of the historical narrative surrounding genocide to take a stand on the contemporary issue. More specifically, we aimed to equip students to 1) define the concept of genocide and apply the attributes of genocide to cases across time; 2) frame the issue of genocide as an ongoing problem by investigating contemporary cases in addition to historical ones; 3) weave a causal narrative for individual cases by looking at context, historical antecedents, major events, international responses, and underlying problems and constraints; and 4) use their historical knowledge to take a reasoned stand on U.S. policy toward genocide. The unit assessment was a policy recommendation paper requiring students to research a current region under threat of genocide and make recommendations for U.S. policy pertaining to the region.

The first lesson focused on helping students understand the concept of genocide. We viewed this lesson as a critical foundation for all other unit goals. As genocide scholar Samuel Totten argues:

[I]t is only through understanding what genocide is and is not—as well as the strengths and weaknesses used in the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide—that students can even begin to gain an understanding of the complexities that surround the perpetration, prevention, and intervention of genocide.³⁶

To teach the concept, we used the “concept formation” approach advocated by social studies and history educators as a powerful strategy for helping students think deeply about central ideas in history and other disciplines.³⁷ The fundamental principle underlying concept formation is that a concept exists through its examples and that students can identify the critical attributes of a concept by analyzing examples and non-examples. Students note differences and similarities among selected examples of the concept, follow with discussions that will help them reach consensus on the critical attributes common across examples, and then apply the concept’s critical attributes to new cases to determine if they are examples or non-examples.³⁸

Our students identified critical attributes of genocide by examining teacher-constructed case readings on the Armenian Genocide, the

Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, and the Rwandan Genocide—cases that cut across time and space, and were included in scholarly works on genocide.³⁹ After reaching consensus on critical attributes of genocide, informed also by the definition from the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, students used another set of case readings to test the attributes they identified from the first set of cases.⁴⁰ Our goal in constructing this set of readings was to provide students with cases that would generate discussion and careful consideration of how their attributes applied to cases across time and space. We wanted students to be able to identify cases as examples or non-examples and defend their position regarding either designation. This set of cases included the Serbian attacks against Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the early 1990s, the “Rape of Nanking” that began in 1937, the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, and the Trail of Tears in the 1830s.

Once students felt confident in their knowledge of the definition of genocide, we moved on to the second lesson, where students considered the human impact of genocide by reading and watching victims’ and witnesses’ accounts. My colleague and I pulled together accounts from literature, documentaries, oral histories, and primary source documents.⁴¹ We used these accounts not only to help students see the human toll, but also to illustrate the warning signs of genocide that scholars and policymakers have begun to study and elucidate.⁴²

Our focus for the third lesson then shifted to examining the responses of the United States and other nations in the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, the Bosnian Genocide, and the Rwandan Genocide. Using readings that we created, we asked students to trace how principles of international relations and the responses of the international community changed over time, and create a timeline or flowchart to illustrate these changes. This lesson culminated with a discussion of the international community today, and the place of the United States within it. Our goal was to encourage students to consider how the political context and international relations at any given time can influence foreign policy.

For the fourth and final lesson, students researched a region under genocide watch, with the goal of writing a policy recommendation on U.S. foreign policy regarding the case. Preparing and writing the policy recommendation included identifying and clarifying

the policy issue; researching relevant background and context; identifying policy alternatives; selecting the best policy option; and preparing a policy recommendation document. We gave students the following guidelines for writing the policy recommendation, and used a rubric with the same elements to evaluate student work:

Title: A short, simple, and descriptive statement of the subject.

Issue: This is the question that will be addressed in the policy recommendation. It should define genocide in one to two sentences, incorporating critical attributes. Then it should state the question being addressed in the recommendation.

Recommendation: The proposed course of action, based on the analysis of the options that follows. *This is the policy you are recommending the government approve.* This is like a thesis statement—it is at the beginning of the document, but really represents the conclusion you’ve come to based on analysis and reasoning.

Justification: This is a summary of the principal arguments for the recommended course of action. You should begin with a *brief summary* of all the options you considered (note: you get into more detail about the options you considered in the “Options” section) and show why your choice is superior to any other. After reading the title, issue statement, recommendation, and justification, readers should understand what you are recommending and why. *The rest of your submission lays out your supporting analysis.*

Background: A concise review of the key details and developments that are behind the need for a policy decision. This section answers the questions: What is this about and why does government need to make a decision? Make sure you limit the background to details that are essential to understanding the issue. It should include:

- **An explanation of the current case.** You should describe the context, what has happened thus far, any warning signs that have been noted, international response to this point, and possible directions if the trend continues.
- **An explanation of at least two past cases of genocide you considered analogous in some ways.** You should describe the context, what happened, warning signs, international response, and consequences.
- **An explanation of what was alike and different among the case you’re considering and the historical cases.**

Options: A thorough and balanced exploration of all the possible alternatives. For each option:

- give a brief description
- list the advantages and disadvantages (each option must have at least one pro and one con, otherwise it's not really an option)

References: A list of references from your research, using Chicago format.

Following the first year of instruction in our combined five modern world history classes, I analyzed student work from all classes and discussed findings with my colleague in an effort to inform our revisions for the second year of implementation.⁴³ Based on this analysis and our individual classroom observations, we concluded that the research and policy recommendation portions of the unit needed the most significant changes. In particular, students needed more guidance in analyzing past cases of genocide in order to inform their arguments about U.S. policy toward contemporary cases. After implementing these changes in our second year of teaching the unit, I analyzed student work again to evaluate the degree to which our changes were successful. In what follows, I argue that both the strengths and challenges evident in students' policy recommendations over the course of two years have important implications for the ways that we can teach students to use historical knowledge to inform their understanding and arguments about contemporary events.

Findings

The culminating task for this unit was for students to write a policy recommendation paper that used historical information to support a position on U.S. policy toward genocide. Each of the following sections focuses on a goal of instruction, using evidence from the policy recommendation papers to explain the degree to which students achieved each goal. Each section also describes changes we implemented as a result of student challenges or feedback, and highlights the strategies we felt were most successful in helping students use world historical information to take a stand on a contemporary issue.

Conceptualizing Genocide

Taking a stand on U.S. policy toward genocide requires one to recognize genocidal acts. As previously explained, our first lesson was a “concept formation” lesson asking students to use examples and non-examples to clarify what genocide is, partly by clarifying what it is not. During both years of implementation, we found that prior to instruction, all students were able to define genocide with varying degrees of specificity, and the majority could name at least one case of genocide, such as the Holocaust, Rwanda, or Darfur. However, we recognized in year one that few students could provide a detailed definition of genocide. Thus, we thought the concept formation lesson beneficial for all students, even for those who knew more than their classmates about genocide, but needed to flesh out their understanding.

An interesting difference between genocide and other world history concepts is that attributes of genocide are laid out for legal application in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, which states:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Though this definition outlines what constitutes genocide in a legal sense, many consider it an inadequate definition. For some it is “too inclusive” because it does not distinguish between violence (“killing” or “causing serious bodily...harm”) with non-lethal acts (“causing...mental harm” and “forcibly transferring children”). For others, it is “too exclusive” because it does not specifically cite

political or social groups among those against whom genocide can be carried out. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the word “intent” is controversial, in that it opens a door for people to deny guilt on the basis that they did not “intend” to commit genocide.⁴⁴

For my colleague and me, the controversies surrounding the legal attributes of genocide underscored the importance of asking students to first identify attributes on their own. Parker noted that disadvantages of concept formation as a strategy are that it does not engage students in criticism or debate,⁴⁵ but with this concept, we saw exactly the opposite. Asking students to first define the concept themselves gave them the knowledge and confidence to view the United Nations definition with a critical eye and engage in exactly the kinds of conversations had by scholars of genocide.⁴⁶ Indeed, three out of our five classes in the first year took issue with the Genocide Convention’s definition after identifying what they believed to be attributes of genocide, voting by majority that their attributes, like those listed below, were more accurate:

- Mass civilian murder
- Targeting of group of people along ethnic, cultural, or religious lines, or some other common trait
- National stress and need for national/political stability
- Systematic, government run or endorsed
- Goal is to eliminate group
- Manipulation of ideas, like fear tactics

Whether students agreed or disagreed with the concept of genocide, we found that concentrating on defining the concept of genocide to be highly successful in year one. Every student across all five classes explicitly defined the concept of genocide in their policy recommendations and every student demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of genocide than they had when first asked to define it. For example, a student who had originally defined genocide simply as “mass killing,” wrote:

Genocide is the mental or physical torture or mass killings of an ethnic, racial or religious group of people. Group members are killed because of their affiliation with the group, and groups are targeted with intent to destroy them.

Despite this success, our students' responses to the lesson revealed that our approach to defining the concept of genocide might have been too narrow. Specifically, many students folded in warning signs of genocide as part of the conceptual definition, which was not part of our original plan or expectations. Indeed, the example of listed class attributes above reveals this tendency to include warning signs like "national stress" and "manipulation of ideas" in their definitions. One student mentioned "dehumanization" as a part of the process of genocide and another mentioned the use of "propaganda." Other students stated, in various terms, that "genocide has clear warning signs," implicitly making the presence of warning signs a part of the definition.

We viewed students' inclusion of the warning signs of genocide as noteworthy because it seemed to increase the functionality of the concept when viewing contemporary cases. Students were charged with the task of making an argument about whether or not the U.S. needed to create policy to stop genocide, which might entail not only stepping in where it occurred, but also preventing it. Furthermore, part of the definition of genocide is that it is "deliberate," which implies that it is planned and carried out over time, making warning signs an inherent part of the concept.

Our students' insights led us to include the warning signs of genocide as part of the concept formation lesson in our second year of implementation. Recognizing common precursors to genocidal acts meant seeing them as part of the concept of genocide. As a result of this change, we saw a number of students spending much more time analyzing risk factors in their policy recommendations. Rather than simply listing events as precursors to genocidal acts, students began to characterize events as attempts at polarization or use of propaganda that were, as one student wrote multiple times, "risks of genocide."

What's the Problem? Framing the Issue of Genocide

In order to address a problem, students first need to fully understand what the problem is. Though all of our students seemed to know something about genocide prior to instruction in our first year, few described genocide as a persistent problem that has continued into the present day. Of those few exceptions, one student described

it as “still happening as we speak,” and another explained, “It’s difficult to stop.” Given the majority’s apparent lack of knowledge, we viewed helping students frame the issue of genocide as one that has been a continual problem in history to be a most pressing goal. We also wanted students to recognize the specific causal and contextual factors of different cases of genocide across time. This, we hoped, would assist them in considering causal and contextual factors when they researched and wrote an argument about a current case of genocide.

The policy recommendation paper we required of students as a culmination of this unit asked them to begin with an explanation of the issue being addressed. Throughout all five classes, the majority of students explicitly stated in the introduction that genocide has been a persistent problem throughout history, and into the present day. Moreover, they used the fact that it has been an enduring issue to argue that it must be addressed in U.S. policy. For example, one student wrote:

Genocide has caused millions of tragic deaths that could have been prevented. When leaders of the world signed the Genocide Convention, it was promised that “never again” would genocide happen. Despite the signing, the world has failed to prevent and stop genocides and several more have occurred with very little done to stop them. Now, what can the United States do to prevent and stop these horrendous genocides from occurring in the future?

Another student wrote:

Even after the world said “never again,” genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur were still carried through and thousands of people were slaughtered. If the world were to have intervened, there would not have been even a speculation of genocide. It is the sole reason that the world did not help, that the genocides were carried out. This shouts loud and clear that there is a problem. And for the sake of humanity and justice, the world upon which we live, and the idea of liberty, something must be changed. But what must change in order for genocide intervention to be more effective?

Among the minority of students who did not use the introduction of the policy recommendation to frame the problem of genocide as a persistent historical problem, most eventually provided evidence that they understood this to be the case. For example, one student wrote in her background section following the introduction:

The 20th century was an age of genocide. It seems the 21st century may be as well. In the past 100 years, approximately 40 million people have been murdered in genocides around the world. It's clear that the U.S. needs to make some important decisions on how to act in the face of genocide.

Students' impassioned statements in their policy recommendations demonstrate not only the power of studying the topic, but also the power of concentrating on the topic over time. As is likely true in many schools, modern world history teachers at our school had traditionally taught genocide as an aspect of the historical periods we were studying—the Armenian Genocide during the study of World War I, the Holocaust during World War II, and cases of genocide in the post-World War II era. By focusing on the topic across time, however, students seemed well equipped to frame the problem as one that has persisted through time, and to use their historical understanding to inform understanding of the present-day issue. As one student wrote:

Within the past century, genocide has killed millions of people and still continues to do the same today despite an international promise to stop it. With this information, what can people do about the current worldwide issue of genocide?

Student responses like this strengthened our commitment to teach genocide as a focused unit. However, while helping students to see genocide as a longstanding problem was important, we ultimately wanted them to build an argument about how the U.S. should address the problem, using evidence to justify their stance. As described below, we found this to be one of our most challenging tasks, requiring the most significant revisions from the first to second year of implementation.

Using Past Cases to Inform the Present: Challenges of Comparison

For the policy recommendation papers, we asked students to state their argument for U.S. policy regarding genocide, providing evidence and background information as support for their justification. The justification was to include a description of the current situation and the inclusion of relevant historical information about past cases. We wanted students to look at the causes and consequences across different cases, and make direct comparisons among them in order

to provide evidence-based reasoning for the course of action they were recommending.

Although students in our first year of implementation did well in weaving causal explanations of historical and contemporary cases of genocide, they overwhelmingly failed to make direct comparisons between current and past cases. Rather, every student simply provided a chronologically ordered description of genocides. Consider the first lines from a sequence of paragraphs in one student paper:

The Armenian Genocide was a deliberate and systematic destruction of the Armenians...

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored extermination of Jews throughout Europe...

Finally, consider the Cambodian Genocide.

This organizational structure was typical of student papers in year one; students would essentially retell the narrative of the history of genocide we had studied in class and then introduce a contemporary case. As case in point, this particular student followed his narrative sequence with a paragraph that began, "One current case of genocide is in Darfur, the region of Sudan." However, nowhere in his paragraph on Darfur did he reference the other genocides he had described. In fact, he never again referred to them in his paper. Consistently, students described past genocides and then a current genocide, neglecting to make direct comparisons. By failing to make direct comparisons, students did not adequately note similarities and differences among cases, which was necessary for a sound policy argument. What is more, their unconnected descriptions of genocides throughout time made us doubt they had used history to inform their arguments at all.

To correct this problem, we implemented a set of heuristics identified by Richard R. Neustadt and Ernest R. May to help policymakers and political decision-makers use history more effectively.⁴⁷ Neustadt and May suggest that in using history for decision-making in the present, people should first look at the current cases under study and sort out the "Known, Unclear, and Presumed."⁴⁸ That is, decision-makers needed to analyze the situation and think about what they know to be true; what they are unsure about or where there are gaps in their understanding; and what they suppose is the case even though they do not have

evidence. Only after looking carefully at what is known about the situation, argue Neustadt and May, can people identify potentially analogous situations. At that point, people need to carefully consider “Likenesses and Differences.”⁴⁹ These likenesses and differences should include consideration of the locale and the world, considerations that we found particularly relevant given our study of genocides and the international community’s responses over time.

In line with Neustadt and May’s recommendations, we asked students in the second year of implementation to use these heuristics and record their thinking after their research on current cases but prior to writing the policy recommendation. In researching South Sudan,⁵⁰ for example, one student noted the following “Known, Unclear, and Presumed” elements of the case:

Known: South Sudan is now independent. They share culture, history, and resources with the rest of Sudan. There is political uncertainty with a new political system in place and elections occurring. There is a history of civil war in the region. Millions of people have been displaced.

Unknown: Whether or not there is a way to come to agreement about resources. Economic future.

Presumed: There continues to be a lot of tension between ethnic groups. People from northern Sudan could strike at anytime, making the transitions even harder for South Sudan (sic).

With this knowledge in hand, the student then chose Rwanda as the most relevant analogy from history. However, before making his recommendation, the student noted differences as well as likenesses between the two cases:

Likenesses: Political chaos, history of violence, ethnic differences.

Differences: International community ignored situation in Rwanda; international community has played a larger role in South Sudan.

The then used his analysis to argue in his policy recommendation that South Sudan was in real danger of genocide and that the United States needed to use its resources and step in to save the people of South Sudan from imminent danger, preventing another Rwanda.

Although some students’ policy recommendations showed no evidence that they had analyzed likenesses and differences among historical and contemporary cases, the majority of students’ papers

did show such evidence. Rather than simply describing genocides in chronological order, most students made direct comparisons, explicitly noting both likenesses and differences that should be taken into consideration in U.S. policy. For example, one student wrote about the systematic killing of Chechens by Russian forces, and used Bosnia and the Holocaust to support her recommendation for U.S. action. She noted that in all cases, people were “targeted for their group membership” and seen as “others” by the state. However, she noted the different motivations for targeting “others” in all three cases, and discussed the more large-scale and widespread nature of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, she saw clear warning signs and recommended that the U.S. take the lead in ending the threat before it escalated.

No students had made such explicit connections between cases in the first year we taught the unit. As a result of asking students to engage in a more deliberate and structured analytical task in our second year of implementation, they were much more likely to note specific contextual factors in their study of past and current cases, and then draw direct and relevant comparisons.

Discussion and Implications

Teaching students to use world historical knowledge for global citizenship is an important task for world history teachers. However, like so many other skills in the study of history, using historical knowledge to reason about contemporary issues is not necessarily simple or natural for students.⁵¹ Yet with careful planning and implementation of instruction aimed at helping students apply historical knowledge, they can do so effectively.

A critical first task in this endeavor is the selection of a concept that is central to the discipline of history and in the contemporary world. My colleague and I chose the concept of genocide because it is at the heart of enduring issues throughout world history and continues to plague human societies today. Selecting such key historical concepts not only lends to instruction that will help students prepare for their roles as global citizens, but also meets outcomes included in the C3 Framework for Social Studies, which suggests that students address compelling questions reflecting enduring issues in the social studies.⁵²

Our unit question, “What should U.S. policy be toward cases of genocide?” required that students first understand what genocide is and how to recognize it. Providing opportunities for students to explore the concept of genocide and identify its critical attributes proved an effective task. Policy recommendations revealed that students were able to name specific attributes of genocide, and recognize cases (or potential cases) of genocide based on these attributes. They engaged in lively discussions about the meaning and implications of genocide, and demonstrated the confidence to expand scholarly and legal definitions of genocide by including warning signs in their attributes as well. By folding these warning signs into their conceptions of genocide, students operationalized the concept, making it more useful for their ultimate goal. In the end, they likely felt better equipped to take a stand on how to prevent genocide, rather than merely take a stand on how to react to it once it is underway.

While the concept of genocide was critical for students to understand and operationalize, equally important was a firm grasp on the long and complex history of genocide. Framing an issue such as genocide requires that students develop a historical narrative to give deeper meaning to the question at hand, and that in developing the narrative, they consider changes over time, as well as the contextual and causal factors that shape chapters of the narrative.⁵³ Our study of cases of genocide across time was meant to provide students with such “usable narratives.”⁵⁴ This proved to be effective in helping students frame the issue of genocide in the contemporary world and in compelling them to approach the issue with passion and urgency. Our instructional design differed from what is sometimes implied in state standards in that we focused a unit on genocide instead of teaching it as part of other events throughout world history. Denis Shemilt has argued that knowledge of only isolated incidents within a narrative poses potential misuses of history in which people draw universal lessons from single incidents or create false analogies between past and present.⁵⁵ Focusing instruction on genocide in the modern world was our attempt to avoid this potential problem.

However, helping students construct a narrative did not necessarily mean they could use it effectively to inform their arguments about the present. In our first year of implementation, it was clear that students could write a narrative, but were not using the narrative to

make appropriate analogies or point out similarities and differences between cases of genocide. To do this, students needed tools that would help them identify usable information for the present. The heuristics suggested by Neustadt and May helped our students analyze and connect cases.⁵⁶ These heuristics included looking for what is known, unclear, and presumed in a current case, and only then choosing appropriate analogous situations from the past. When students were asked to do this, and then tease out likenesses and differences between analogous cases, they tended to give more careful consideration to contextual factors, and to make more direct comparisons between cases in their policy recommendations. Employment of these heuristics led to significant improvements in the way students used history to inform the present.

As Brian Girard and Lauren McArthur Harris have argued, world history can be an important space for developing global citizenship competencies.⁵⁷ Indeed, scholars and educators have long argued that history is important in the school curriculum because historical knowledge is central to civic competence.⁵⁸ However, we have only recently begun to understand how students use historical knowledge for civic purposes,⁵⁹ and we still lack a clear picture of curricular interventions that equip students to use their historical understanding to take reasoned positions and act upon issues. The unit of instruction described in this article was an attempt to remedy this problem. It begins to uncover important steps in helping students use historical information to reason about contemporary issues: selecting and teaching enduring concepts, helping students understand the historical narratives underlying such enduring concepts, and applying heuristics that will allow them to make direct connections between past and present while avoiding hasty and simplistic comparisons.

In our increasingly interconnected world, history educators have an important role to play. To fulfill our important roles, we need to continue investigating effective world history instruction and the strategies that can help students use their historical knowledge to be informed, competent global citizens.

Notes

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1. Brian Girard and Lauren McArthur Harris, "Considering World History as a Space for Developing Global Citizenship Competencies," *The Educational Forum* 77, no. 4 (2013).

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27. A review of world history standards in the ten most populous states in the U.S. reveals that all but North Carolina require that students learn about

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28. Stav Ziv, “‘Invaluable Lessons’: More States Making Holocaust, Genocide Education a Must,” *Newsweek*, 20 June 2016, <<http://europe.newsweek.com/invaluable-lessons-more-states-making-holocaust-genocide-education-must-472003>>.

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31. Many thanks to Peter Holland for his thoughtful work on the unit plan that is the focus of this article.

32. William S. Parsons and Samuel Totten, “Teaching and Learning About Genocide: Questions of Content, Rationale, and Methodology,” *Social Education* 55, no. 2 (February 1991).

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34. Parsons and Totten, “Teaching and Learning About Genocide.”

35. See, for example, Tamara L. Shreiner, “Framing a Model of Democratic Thinking to Inform Teaching and Learning in Civic Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2009); “Using Historical Knowledge to Reason About Contemporary Political Issues”; Foster, Ashby, and Lee, *Usable Historical Pasts*.

36. Totten, “Wrestling with the Definition of ‘Genocide,’” 72.

37. Walter P. Parker, “Thinking to Learn Concepts,” *The Social Studies* 79, no. 2 (March–April 1988): 70; Lauren McArthur Harris and Tamara L. Shreiner, “Why Can’t We Just Look It Up? Using Concept Formation Lessons to Teach Global Patterns and Local Cases in World History,” *World History Connected* 11, no. 2 (June 2014).

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39. For example, Totten, *Teaching About Genocide: Issues, Approaches, and Resources*; Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*. We constructed our case readings by pulling excerpts from texts on genocide and modifying the texts for length, and readability. We also made sure all the readings included descriptions of people involved and relevant events prior to and during the genocides.

40. Walter P. Parker, “Concept Formation,” Teachinghistory.org, 2013, <<http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/25184>>.

41. For collections with primary sources and eyewitness accounts, see University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, “Histories & Narratives,” Regents of the University of Minnesota, <<http://chgs.umn.edu/histories/>>; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Remember Survivors and Victims,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <<https://www.ushmm.org/remember-survivors-and-victims/>>.

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42. Gregory H. Stanton, “The Ten Stages of Genocide,” Genocide Watch, <<http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html>>; Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, “Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers,” (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The American Academy of Diplomacy, and The Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace, 2008).

43. Given our own individual teaching styles, we graded our students’ work independently. My analysis of student work for the purposes of research and revision took place separately.

44. Totten, “Wrestling with the Definition of ‘Genocide.’”

45. Parker, “Thinking to Learn Concepts.”

46. For examples of debates, see Totten, “Wrestling with the Definition of ‘Genocide.’”

47. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

48. *Ibid.*, 37.

49. *Ibid.*

50. This student’s work was written in 2012.

51. Shreiner, “Using Historical Knowledge to Reason About Contemporary Political Issues.”

52. National Council for Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).

53. Shreiner, “Using Historical Knowledge to Reason About Contemporary Political Issues.”

54. *Ibid.*; Denis Shemilt, “Drinking an Ocean and Pissing a Cupful: How Adolescents Make Sense of History,” in *The Problem of the Canon and the Future of History Teaching*, ed. Linda Symcox and Arie Wilschut (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009); Foster, Ashby, and Lee, *Usable Historical Pasts*.

55. Denis Shemilt, “The Caliph’s Coin: The Currency of Narrative Frameworks in History Teaching,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

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58. Shreiner, “Using Historical Knowledge to Reason About Contemporary Political Issues.”

59. See, for example, Shreiner, “Using Historical Knowledge to Reason About Contemporary Political Issues”; Foster, Ashby, and Lee, *Usable Historical Pasts*; Howson, “Potential and Pitfalls in Teaching ‘Big Pictures’ of the Past.”