Teaching history with big ideas

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History is a word about which people will have strong opinions. For those who are intrigued by past events or individuals, history will emanate questions and interest. For others, the word alone will instill fear accompanied by confessions of dislike, a negative classroom experience, or lack of understanding. Various history classes are required in school curricula throughout students' academic careers, whether they like it or not. Regardless of how the majority of the population feels about history, there are two issues often found in classrooms. First, many students will ask why they have to learn about the past since they assume it has nothing to do with them, and secondly, teachers face the challenge of making history relevant and meaningful to students in a standards based classroom. S. G. Grant and Jill Gradwell's new edited book *Teaching history with big ideas* seeks to explore and address these two issues through the eyes of eight practicing history teachers, who the editors consider ambitious teachers.

As a history teacher and doctoral student from Virginia who is familiar with the Standards of Learning and the need for students to perform well on state-mandated tests, I was initially drawn to Grant and Gradwell's book *Teaching history with big ideas*, simply because of the title. Teachers in high stakes, standards based classrooms are always looking for methods to bridge theory and practice, which the editors propose can be done through ambitious teaching using big ideas. I was curious to discover the editors' criteria for one to be considered an ambitious teacher, as well as their definition of a "big idea". In terms of the ambitious teacher, Grant and Gradwell assert that "good history teachers take no single shape, teach in no single fashion, and assess their efforts with no single measure" (p. 2). They propose it will take courage for teachers to transform to classrooms guided by big ideas. Ambitious teaching is "less about the instructional practices a teacher uses than it is about what a teacher knows and how she or he interacts with ideas, with students, and with the conditions of schooling" (p. viii). For students to better understand history and have a desire to learn about the past, the editors propose that it needs to be relevant to them. Students of history need to understand how past events influence their lives and can impact the future.

While Wiggins and McTighe (2005) suggest that big ideas are the "... 'core' of the subject; they need to be uncovered; we have to dig deep until we get to the core" (p. 67), Grant and Gradwell view big ideas as a "question or generalization that is intellectually honest and is cast in a manner that should appeal to the students" (p. vii). They further assert that teachers should pose the big idea question to students at the beginning of a unit, with the goal being to discuss it fruitfully upon completion of the unit. This pedagogical shift changes the role of the teacher from lecturer to facilitator. Students' roles will change from observers to active

participants in their learning through engagement in activities and research, the use of historical documents, role playing, debate, and writing.

Teaching history with big ideas focuses on eight of the editors' former university students who now teach in the state of New York. These teachers are as pedagogically diverse as the schools in which they teach. The contributors consist of five high school and three middle school teachers, who range from beginning to experienced teachers. They teach in varied environments, with three in suburban schools, three in city schools and two in city charter schools. What they share however, is a required state mandated standardized exam in history. *Teaching history with big ideas* consists of case studies written by these teacher contributors, who share their experiences of ambitious teaching with big ideas in the classroom. Each essay is followed by an analysis and evaluation by the editors. Both Grant and Gradwell appear to understand the pressures faced by teachers. Their goal is to assist classroom teachers to meet and exceed these pressures by offering strategies using big ideas to improve pedagogical practices.

Grant and Gradwell have been on both sides of the academic fence as classroom teachers and in the realm of university academics. They acknowledge that teachers are not always receptive to new pedagogical suggestions because there is a "mistrust and miscommunication between classroom teachers and university academics" (p. v). Teachers often feel that university educators are out of touch with life in the classroom, and that many of the strategies they promote appear successful in print but not in practice with adolescent students. While the editors recognize this tension, they maintain that the teachers who use big ideas not only assist students in developing higher level thinking skills, and in becoming better writers and historians, their students will also perform just as well on the high stakes tests.

The first contributor, Michael Meyer, is a tenth grade global history and geography teacher who can attest to the pressure teachers face. As a new teacher in a wealthy, suburban school, he was told by the principal, "Just so there is no confusion about whether or not you should be teaching to the tests, let me be clear: teach to the test—it is how you will be evaluated" (p. 23). As an ambitious teacher, however, Meyer followed Grant and Gladwell's advice to "carve out pedagogical paths that aim toward more powerful teaching and learning" (p. 9). Meyer was beginning a unit on Africa and he "began to see how the fact that we know so little about Africa reveals much about history and our modern views on the world" (p. 27). He implemented a big idea question by challenging the students to understand "why we don't know anything about Africa" (p. 27). In an attempt to avoid having his high achieving students respond to the big idea with what they thought he wanted to hear, Myer relinquished some of his classroom didactics to have students address bigger issues and gain knowledge necessary for the state-mandated test. He achieved this with KWL charts—what the students *know*, what they *want* to learn, and what they *learned*—primary sources, student-generated PowerPoint presentations, projects, and culminating essay tests for assessment.

For Meyer, ambitious teaching is "doable as long as you look at it as a continual process" (p. 23). After many changes to his unit, Meyer saw evidence that student learning is taking place. For instance, when students were asked why they were learning about Africa, one wrote, "Learning about Africa is important because it might change how we view people of color

today" (p. 34). Of course, not all students glean the same degree of knowledge to answer the big question, as evidenced by two students who answered the same question by writing, "It doesn't" (p. 35). Although not all students have demonstrated success, Meyer was encouraged by the students' progress and plans to add more big idea units. Central to his argument is the claim that, if teachers allow for it, students will take responsibility for their own learning and know more than the minimum required for a state mandated test.

As a first year teacher, Megan Sampson had high ideals and planned to prepare her students "to succeed in a world of standardized tests and high expectations" (p. 39). She taught Global History II in a charter school with racially and culturally diverse students. For the second semester of her career, Sampson was assigned to prepare a small group of students who had previously failed the state's Regents test. Since Sampson was reviewing two years of information in less than one semester, she decided to prepare her students by teaching with big ideas.

Sampson divided her semester into nine units with each unit having a big idea question. She admits that her students were initially skeptical, but found they did respond to questions "related to their lives" (p. 47). While Sampson does not focus on her pedagogical methods in this book, she does share a chart that includes each unit's big idea question, as well as some of her own daily questions (p. 45-46). She witnessed increased student participation as they addressed each big question through class discussions and writing. It became apparent to Sampson that all class members were gaining confidence. Unfortunately, the students were not successful on the state mandated tests. She was not, however, held to be responsible. She surmised that her colleagues had no expectations for these students to succeed regardless of teacher or classroom organization.

Although Sampson's students did not pass the standardized test by her teaching with big ideas, she states history is now real to them. As she reflects, the students started to think independently, related the class to their personal lives, and it was evident they were "invested and interested in the material" (p. 53). Sampson states she benefited from teaching with big ideas, and reports that her and the students' self-efficacy increased. Big ideas will continue to be a part of her pedagogical practices as it was through this experience she found history became "meaningful for my students" and "that ancient history did not have to be dull and lifeless" (p. 54).

Joseph Karb and Andrew Beiter suggest that students can learn to value human life through big ideas. When their curriculum specialist advised them to "cover a little less content in more detail rather than try to skim everything" (p. 58), they essentially had institutional permission to implement big ideas with their eighth grade rural middle school classes on the Holocaust and other genocides. Rather than pose a question for the unit, they challenged the students with a big idea which was to "construct a 'recipe' for genocide" (p. 59). As they taught about the Holocaust, they wanted the students to be able to identify the warning signs of genocide, but simultaneously needed to be cautious because the Holocaust is a sensitive topic to teach. Student empathy is important, but teachers need to be careful with Holocaust simulations so there is not a risk of psychological damage to the students or a minimization of the

experiences of the victims. They began their unit with the Treaty of Versailles to help students understand the mindset of the German people.

Karb and Beiter contend that by beginning in Versailles, the students were "beginning to understand the psyche of the German people" (p. 63). Through teaching with a big idea, the students had a recipe for genocide by beginning with a society in turmoil, as evidenced by the Treaty of Versailles, and added the causes and the people involved. Karb and Beiter encourages empathy by using biographies of Holocaust victims and inviting a Holocaust survivor as a guest speaker. Through this, they could "help students understand the early warning signs of mass murder so they would be better equipped to prevent such occurrences in the future" (p. 59). Ideally, they hoped that their students would apply this knowledge by being proactive against injustices in their own lives. In implementing big ideas, Karb and Beiter suggest that their students were better able to understand the causes of the Holocaust, the roles of resisters and bystanders, and recognize that genocides continue today, thus making these lessons relevant to their students' lives by creating "a connection between the Holocaust and what goes on in the hallways of a typical school" (p. 69).

Tricia Davis uses big ideas to make learning relevant to her students and asserts that, though there is less emphasis placed on test preparation, she believes students will be successful on state-mandated tests. However, Davis states she continued to assess her students with criterion-referenced tests formatted to match the state-mandated Regents test. She was concerned about test scores and, like many teachers, fell into the trap of teaching to the test. Davis taught for fifteen years at a parochial school and public high school until she moved to a progressive urban charter school (recipient of a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). The grant funded cross-curricular literacy teaching through the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound Model. Davis admits she had previously been "intimidated by the thought of teaching students how to write…we did not have time to teach writing and it was the English teachers' jobs anyway" p. 85). The school used "Role, Audience, Format, Topic, and Strong verb" (RAFT) to encourage students to write from a point of view other than their own. The first step for Davis was to develop big ideas and subsequent guiding questions to investigate the encounter the Native Americans had with the Europeans. Her unit goal was for the students to understand the acquisition of power, how it is maintained, and its impact, but her long-term goal was to use a big idea so students will "remember in ten years, not just for the exam" (p. 88). She proposes that when developing guiding questions in a big idea lesson, the "guiding questions may be unanswerable or have a variety of answers, but they lead to the big ideas" (p. 88). By teaching with big ideas, Davis expected higher student motivation if learning was relevant to their lives.

Davis' students did exhibit empathy, sometimes at the risk of focusing so much on the emotion of an individual that they did not fully answer the question. Their writing demonstrated that they were able to understand the relevance of what they had learned. Although students did not write exactly as Davis had hoped, she nonetheless found the RAFTS model beneficial. "Most students evinced an enjoyment of writing about history through the voices of historical people, they demonstrated their knowledge of the content, and they performed well on the high-stakes New York State exam" (p. 104). She does note that the special education students did not

benefit as much as the other students did. However, "reaching beyond these exams has made me a better teacher and my students are better writers and thinkers" (p. 104).

Sarah Foel teaches at a suburban middle school where students typically perform well on standardized testing, and administrators support the academic freedom of the teachers. During her first year of teaching, she was disappointed that both she and her honors students became confused and frustrated in their attempt to analyze Civil War documents regarding slavery. She realized she had placed more emphasis on the activity than on the essential goal of identifying perspectives of slavery. She redesigned her lesson to focus her students on the big question: "Was slavery a necessary evil or just plain evil?" (p. 112). Foel states that although she did not realize it at the time, she had found the benefits of teaching with big ideas by focusing on a broader question.

Foel incorporated big ideas into all of her lessons and ambitiously developed themes based on people and events, rather than teaching chronologically. Class discussions focused on student questions around documents they analyzed, and the big ideas benefited all of her students regardless of academic capabilities. Although her test scores remained unchanged, history became more relevant for her students. Foel states that teachers need to "embody students with the power to think and to love learning, to see that they have the ability to shape the future" (p. 123).

While pursuing her undergraduate degree, Julie Doyle was exposed to big questions by a political philosophy professor. Through big ideas, she found a connection to her other courses and discovered that her studies were relevant to her own life. This changed her outlook as a student, ignited her desire to learn, and ultimately improved her grades. Doyle was encouraged by Gradwell in a graduate teaching course to use big ideas in lessons, and quickly became a fan. In her tenth grade teaching position at a rural high school, she "expected to see this methodology light up the faces up [*sic*] apathetic youth, provoke the gifted child to work harder, and cause parents to wonder where I had been hiding" (p. 127). Although this did not happen, she continues to use big ideas because she notices that "students take on the big questions of history, they become engaged, make connections, and acquire confidence as they become more than humble consumers of historical material…they develop the ability to approach the media with a critical eye" (p. 129). Doyle used big ideas to investigate whether or not Native Americans benefited from imperialism. To make this relevant to the students, Doyle made connections between current events and historical issues. She asserts that by doing this, "students are more likely to retain historical ideas and to be able to see historical concepts as events unfold in our world (p. 130).

Students used photographs, generated speeches, and developed differing viewpoints, all of which allowed them to see history through various perspectives and develop their own. Doyle incorporated technology into her lesson through a blog assignment, where "students offered rich, unique, and insightful assessments on the impact of imperialism" (p. 135). She knows from personal experience that big ideas both validated and challenged her journey as a student. Teaching with big ideas seemed to flow naturally for Doyle; however, it was not the same for the final teacher contributor of this book who admits it was a struggle.

An eleventh grade teacher in a suburban school, Mary Beth Bruce had tried big ideas without success until the concept finally clicked for her. She states, "I cannot imagine teaching without using big ideas…I always begin with the end in mind" (p. 143). The majority of the teachers in her school who incorporate big ideas into their units teach elective courses without a high stakes test. She adds that although administrators "support more ambitious teaching through the use of big ideas and performance tasks, on the last day of school, the only things celebrated are Regents exam results" (p. 145).

Bruce teaches AP United States History and wants her students to learn more than facts. She realizes that "history is subject to multiple interpretation [*sic*] and that there is not always a right answer" (p. 146); therefore, she wants her students to come to their own conclusions about historical events. She had completed a unit around the big idea of "'Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution?'and'Reconstruction: A Race to Reunite or a Never-ending Fight?'" (p. 147). Bruce designed a historiography workshop whereby the students created their own big idea and completed research to develop their own Reconstruction discourse. Her goal was for the students to improve their understanding of historical events and to do so, she had to trust the "students' intellect and their ability to think and be creative" (p. 163). Students read documents and examined the viewpoints of others in order to develop a historical narrative that would support their big idea. She attributes the students' hard work and success to her willingness to allow them to take ownership in their own learning.

Teaching history with big ideas suggests that students need to take ownership of their learning if they are to see history as relevant to their lives. This requires teachers surrendering some of their control of the content and the classroom and trusting students to develop skills and gain experience to think more critically. Students will still be able to recall facts, but they will also be able to understand history as a powerful and relevant way to think about the past in relation to their own lives. Grant and Gradwell propose that ambitious teaching is not about instructional strategies a teacher uses, but her interactions with students and teaching. I agree that the interaction between a teacher and her students, colleagues and community are very important; however, I assert that the strategies a teacher uses determines whether she is ambitious or not and instructional strategies define the type of teacher one becomes. Throughout my teaching career, I have seen many of the techniques the various teachers used in this book incorporated into many classrooms. My initial reaction is that some of the contributors in this book are not truly ambitious since what they do is not sufficiently different from what I have seen many teachers do in their own classrooms. It is also possible that those teachers I did not consider ambitious are more ambitious than I had initially presumed.

Students enter classrooms with varying skills and levels of comfort and although they are on the other side of the desk, the same is true for teachers. KWL charts or student generated PowerPoint presentations may not appear to be representative of an ambitious teacher to many, but it may be so for a novice teacher, or one who lacks self-efficacy. If teachers have the courage to try something new, then by Grant and Gradwell's standards they are ambitious. I propose, however, that ambitious teaching needs to be more and be seen as a continual process of growth and becoming. To be ambitious, teachers need to be willing to consistently step out of their

comfort zone, be open-minded enough to try new things, not allow failures to deter them, and persevere to challenge themselves, their students, and status quo. I agree with Grant's (2003) assertion in an earlier work, that "teachers who choose to teach conservatively face an easier path than those who choose to push hard themselves and their students. With even a modest effort, the former can expect little challenge or resistance or reward. Ambitious teachers can expect all three" (p. 185).

While the contributors demonstrate the benefits of teaching with big ideas, there is disappointingly little focus on assessment. All of the teachers incorporated at least one valid measurement of understanding from Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) "six facets of understanding" (p. 161), but more details on their assessments and the use of rubrics would have been more beneficial to the reader. It appears that the teachers did assess in a "complex, opened and authentic way" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 170), but I am not sure to what extent this occured. Although all contributors lauded the benefits of teaching with big ideas, there was a disparity in the Foel's and Davis's achievement levels of special education students. As an educator, I am curious why the editors did not surmise the reasons for this. It would have been beneficial to other teachers if they would have delved deeper into likely reasons for the inconsistent levels of special education achievement, and possible solutions. It would also have been useful to include those teachers who tried and failed with big ideas, which could have helped other teachers avoid the same pitfalls.

The question now is whether teachers should incorporate big ideas into their classroom. I have heard teachers comment that the pressure of the implemented standards restricts their flexibility in the classroom. Many express that they are teaching to the test due to the limited time they have to cover the required material. However, Wiggins and McTigue (2006) argue that teachers do not need to teach to the test for students to learn the required content. They propose that "a focus on big ideas, robust assessment, and a focused and coherent learning plan makes it likely that state standards are addressed and met" (p. 306). As the contributors to this book indicate, ambitious teachers refuse to allow standardized testing to become their tyrant. This book proposes that "if one teaches with big ideas and in other ambitious ways, student achievement will improve" (p. 24). Some teachers may be hesitant to make these changes, whereas teachers of elective courses may be more willing to try big ideas. Standards-based teachers fear the change could jeopardize their current test scores. Bruce found the irony that "although district administrators seem to support more ambitious teaching through the use of big ideas and performance tasks, on the last day of school, the only things celebrated are Regents exam results" (p. 145).

I will be the first to admit that I, like many other teachers, have difficulty relinquishing control in the classroom. Many times, as educators, we do not believe students are capable of learning on their own and that we must spoon-feed them all of the information. Maybe it is time for us to stop enabling them and allow them to take responsibility for their own learning. As I read this book, I kept wondering how my pedagogical strategies would have been different if this book had been published earlier in my teaching career. Would I have tried teaching with big ideas? Yes, although I would have been very nervous doing so with the state-mandated testing

looming over me. Will I implement big ideas in the future? I will, although not as aggressively as Sampson, but in a slower approach more akin to Meyer's. Eventually, after gaining confidence to teach with big ideas, I may push the limits and include throughline questions, which move beyond Grant's ambitious teaching to cross a boundary into "dangerous teaching […] "necessary for the health of schools as cites of critical thought" (den Heyer, 2005, p. 2).

Overall, this book is a worthwhile read for all secondary level history teachers and administrators. I have recommended this book to friends willing to try new pedagogical strategies, as well as to friends whose enthusiasm for teaching has somewhat diminished. Although big ideas may not be the operational tool for the success of all students, I believe this book can serve as a source of reflection and motivation to encourage teachers as they negotiate the difficult terrain of teaching history in high stakes standards based classrooms. Foel's comment especially powerful in this regard: "Some teachers are scared to move away from teaching to the test. But shouldn't you be scared not to?" (p. 119). We must remain oriented to where we are now and ultimately where we want to go as ambitious history teachers in this era of standards and high stakes tests.

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