

How Big Ideas Shape My Teaching;
How My Teaching Shapes Big Ideas
Teaching Civilization from the Outside and Inside

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TEACHING HISTORY: THE DILEMMA

Each August, I ask my students, “What is history?” Many giggle and look awkwardly at each other. After I tell them it is OK to say what they really think, they tend to respond, “Dead people.” These students already have a flat impression of history and didn’t seem too excited to be in social studies again. So this is my challenge: How can I make 4000 years of history about dead people meaningful to a group of “regular” sixth graders in South Carolina?

In the first part of the paper I present the use of big ideas as way to organize curriculum and address state standards. The second part of the paper describes how I try to ignite personal meaning for students through the use of a year long project that develops the big idea of Civilization. The third part of the paper presents student descriptions of the question, “What is a civilization?” The responses are divided into two groups: 1) students highly engaged in a year long project dealing with Civilization and 2) students not highly engaged in a year long project deal with Civilizations. Within this third part, observations are made about the student responses and the differences between the two.

HOW BIG IDEAS SHAPE MY TEACHING: THE OUTSIDER’S VIEW

As with most public school teachers, state standards provide the content of my curriculum. In fact, my curriculum, as stated by my district, **is** the standards. Supporting the standards is the textbook, and I certainly could march through the text meeting each and every standard. However, a grasp of the bigger picture of Civilization may never be created. [I use a capitalized Civilization to indicate when I mean the big idea of Civilization.] I needed to use big ideas to structure my content in a way to meet standards and assist in the broader understanding of Civilization. Perhaps then students would understand unifying concepts in addition to a bunch of dead people.

The big idea of Civilization itself is too broad to teach directly, hence I took the strands of my standards to be anchors for Civilization: geography, government, economics, culture. The strand

of Culture is a practical modification of the History strand that calls for an understanding of “historical world cultures” and allows for the study of a people’s way of life. Within each strand, I then articulated general categories after examining the details of the standards, my text, and additional resources. My organization of Civilization is shown in Appendix 1: Web of Big Idea of Civilization.

The progressive layers of Civilization enable me to relate, compare, and analyze each civilization using common categories. Students and I can build an understanding of the geography, government, economics, and culture of a civilization and develop a coherent statement about Civilization from the perspective of a particular civilization. As this process occurs throughout the year with each civilization, students become accustomed to the language of Civilization and the commonalities between such diverse civilizations as China, India, Sumer, and Egypt. For instance, ziggurats of Sumer, the pyramids of Egypt, and temples of Greece and Rome are all massive constructions with distinct cultural and social impact but connected as expressions and means for religion. Also, social structure of laborers, craft workers, merchants, warriors, nobles, priests and rulers can be laid out and analyzed in each civilization. By using my strands as a guide I can construct layers for the big idea of Civilization. Consequently, the organization around a big idea highlights and categorizes significant elements of each civilization that leads to a greater awareness of Civilization.

While potentially enlightening, this structure is only part of the answer to my original query. History remains merely an academic pursuit and civilizations are still a bunch of “dead people.” Civilizations are viewed, studied, learned and compared from the outside. Comprehension may exist, but meaning has not yet been created. In order to dive to this level, I believe one’s emotional commitment needs to be tapped. To do this, students need to care about the civilization we study; care about Civilization itself.

HOW MY TEACHING SHAPES BIG IDEAS: EXPERIENCES OF AN INSIDER

I wanted to make the study of Civilization meaningful for my students and myself. How could they realize that the pyramids and the Great Wall of China are not only interesting, but that they had significant meaning and consequences within their respective civilization? How could students somehow get inside the lives of the people who created them? I wanted students to feel Civilization as an insider of Civilization as much as possible; thereby experiencing desire, concern, despair, joy, and struggle from the vantage point of the members of a developing civilization. As such, students could realize that Civilization is not just “dead men” but is functioning today.

In order to get inside content, I began with the assumption that students are more likely to construct insider’s meaning if they could have the power to “develop” their own civilization and face related and similar issues that ancient civilizations faced.

Following from this assumption, I developed a year-long project that requires each student to develop his or her own civilization built from student selected features of the civilizations we study, such as: the Ancient Egyptians, Ancient Greeks, and West African Kingdoms. I call it the Civilization Project. Again, as we study each civilization, specific features are categorized into topics and then into strands. Content instruction occurs through a variety of means: textbook, simulations, research, Internet virtual tours, questions, videos, etc. However, integrated each day is the potential to make some feature of the ancient civilization a part of their own civilization as a way to develop his/her civilization.

The core of the Civilization Project is that students make their own decisions about the direction of the civilization. The first and most common decision is about “bringing in” features from civilizations we study into their own. To do this, students first decide what areas of need they have by checking the Web of Big Idea of Civilization and comparing their own civilization to it. Next, students select not more than two items from each civilization studied to add to their evolving

civilization (i.e. Paper from China, Samurai from Japan, Laws from Sumer, or Scribes from Egypt). “Bringing in an item” is done through the completion of Development Sheets. A feature’s Development Sheet includes the name of the feature, the civilization where it originated, a description of the feature, the uses in the student’s own civilization, the benefits for the student’s own civilization, and a colored illustration. Items are categorized into the areas of Government, Economics and Culture and students keep a table of contents listing each feature within their own civilization, its category, and the civilization of origin. A key consequence of Development Sheets is that they, and other civilization related activities, contribute to the growth of one’s population. And, populations are taxed thereby providing income for the government (that is the student.) Income can be spent on civilization related expenses, as well as late passes and fines for being tardy. Development Sheets are also resources for civilizations as they face uncertainties. Over the year, a student’s civilization evolves into a manifestation of the big idea of Civilization.

In addition to Development Sheets, students face challenges as all civilizations did/do. Challenges come in the form of general disasters (i.e. drought, fire, theft, rebellion, disease, greedy officials, counterfeit money, traders being lost) and a host of content-related issues, such as:

- Selecting technology to respond to issues of a river (Sumer and Egypt);
- Developing laws to address issues of youths (Sumer);
- Analyzing social structure and opportunities (Ancient India);
- Determining the extent and means of unification (Ancient China);
- Defending against a military attack (Greek/Roman);
- Articulating the extent of participatory government (Greek/Roman);
- Deciding on colonization (Greek/Phoenician);
- Opening markets for trade (West African Kingdoms);
- Surviving the Black Death (Middle Ages);
- Seizing a castle and leading a Crusade (Middle Ages);
- Competing for a “Renaissance Man” (Renaissance);
- Delivering a speech about a religious split (Reformation).

These challenges bring issues that faced ancient civilizations to the students themselves and require thoughtful, creative, and contextual problem solving. Students use their Development

Sheets to assist them in developing responses. Student civilizations are not exempt from consequences as population (hence taxation) is affected positively or negatively based on student response and the civilization develops as stated in the response.

The case of Market Day demonstrates how repeated experiences are scaffold for growth and depth of understanding of economics and ultimately of Civilization. Market Day is an opportunity for students, as merchants, to purchase products from other civilizations. Students select products to create within their civilization based upon their natural resources and possible technology. There is some leeway in order to maintain enthusiasm; for instance, students first want to sell leather pants and designer shoes. Students create an advertisement with an illustration, description, price, and catchy statement for the product. On Market Day, students circulate around the room purchasing products offered by their classmates' civilizations. Students write a rationale as to why they purchased the products they did, specifically addressing how the products will benefit the people of their civilization. Further, students receive profit from the sales of their products. In the first Market Day (with the Phoenicians), students make the product without cost for their civilization, receive money to stimulate the market, and receive a percentage of their sales for profit. In the second Market Day (with the Chinese), students use their own civilization money to purchase products. The third Market Day (with the West African Kingdoms) incorporates the establishment of a market in order to take advantage of trade practices in the year CE 800 and being able to travel to different markets. The fourth Market Day (with the Middle Ages and Renaissance) adds the layer of having students pay for the production of their product, write a guarantee/warranty for products, and pay the cost of accessing additional markets. In addition, the establishment of banks is available.

Through the Civilization Project the big idea of Civilization develops over time; it is not directly taught. Students work with knowledge over time and new knowledge is a resource, not

something destined for the trash can. Students are able to learn from mistakes and improve; experiencing positive and negative consequences based on their decisions. As the teacher, I revise and invent new aspects of the project based on student performance, reaction, and input.

The overall objective of this project is for students to develop a surviving civilization. Students begin to tap the insider's view of Civilization as they make decisions about providing for their civilization and people. A path is not fixed; students themselves determine areas of greatest need and features of greatest assistance. Thus, rather than studying an ancient civilization as completed, fixed, and dead, the civilization becomes an opportunity, open, and alive as it can contribute to one's own civilization.

CONCEPTIONS OF "CIVILIZATION"

The big idea of Civilization is taught in my classroom from two perspectives: outside through the organization and comparison of concepts and inside from students developing their own civilization. As the teacher, I wanted to gain some insight into the students' evolving conception of Civilization throughout the year.

To get at this issue, I asked one question five times during the year (at the beginning of the year and at the end of each quarter, including the end of the year.) The question/prompt was: "What is a civilization?" I analyzed their responses and created a spreadsheet of their words. Formal analysis of the data has not been completed at this point; however, the words used by students is descriptive of their developing conception of the big idea of Civilization. Furthermore, by looking at the words of students highly engaged in the Civilization Project and students not highly engaged in the Civilization Project I can begin to see any additional impact that the Civilization Project may have on student understanding.

During the 2001-2002 school year, ninety students were enrolled in my class, though not all ninety answered my prompt each time due to absences or transferring in or out of school. Of the

ninety students, I selected ten students who were highly engaged in the Civilization Project as measured by their completion of over 90% of the Civilization Project assignments during the third quarter. These students also represent different gender, race, and ability level (as measured by the criterion-referenced state standardized writing assessment). Their keyword responses to the prompt are listed in Appendix 2: Responses - Highly Engaged Students. I also selected twelve students who were not highly engaged in the Civilization Project as determined by completing 71% or less of Civilization Project assignments during the third quarter. Again, different genders, races, and written ability levels are represented. These keyword responses to the prompt are listed in Appendix 3: Responses - Not Highly Engaged Students.

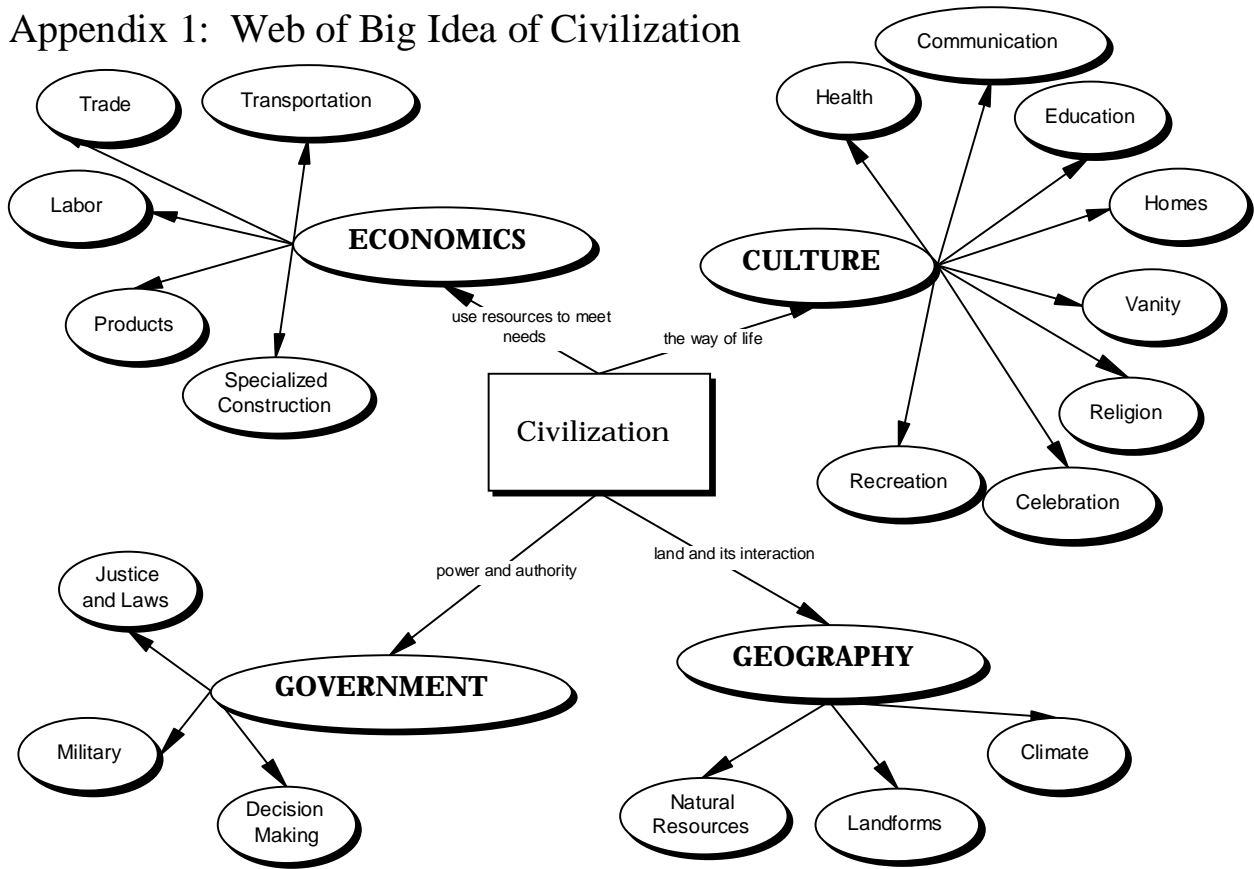
The keyword responses on each set provide three similar insights. First, students seem to have a fuller, richer, and more complex understanding of Civilization as the year progressed. Second, students' conception of a civilization begins mostly with static descriptions (people and place) and expand to include active descriptions (decisions, development, better, choices, care, grows). Third, student responses increase with content-related descriptions of specific elements (army, food, laws, markets, rulers) and general features (government, economics, culture, communication, people).

Despite the similarities, there are intriguing differences represented. First, highly engaged students demonstrate a richer understanding of Civilization earlier than those students who are not highly engaged in the Civilization Project. Second, big idea concepts such as geography, economics, and culture are more common in highly engaged students. Third, highly engaged students show a deeper understanding of the difficulties facing civilizations rather than just providing an idealized view of forward progress.

These observations are highlights and descriptions that provide insight for a teacher into the teaching of a big idea and the methods used in helping students grasp a big idea. Additional analysis

and research is necessary to better understand the impact of big idea teaching from the outside and the inside. Specifically I am interested in better understanding the impact of the Civilization Project, as a model for teaching big ideas of social studies from the inside, on student learning. Options include examining strand consistency over time for each student in response to the prompt and comparing student responses by determining student engagement based on the difference between completion of Civilization Project and non Civilization Project assignments. In terms of the Civilization Project, I plan to expand its operation and incorporate additional features that allow students to engage and experience consequences of the actions of each other's civilization and the existence of ancient civilizations.

Appendix 1: Web of Big Idea of Civilization



Appendix 2: Responses - Highly Engaged Students

GEC = Government, Economics, Culture

Student	1-August	2-October	3-December	4-March	5-May
<u>Dymaryss</u> Female Black	People Choice	Place Environment	Place Resources	Place People Communicate Make the place better	People together Better Product Food Power Leader Help Better choices Get needs before wants
<u>Jarrod</u> Male Black Below Basic	Place People live	Place People live Crops Trade Ruler	Place People invent New laws New weapons Travel New protection	Place Grows Creates Sell Better plans for attack Smarter	Place People Grows Learn Decisions Choices Better
<u>Teara</u> Female Black Basic	Place Act normal	Place People live Made it livable	Place GEC Geography Way of life Order Workers and goods Unique	Daily life People Home Jobs Recreation Different style	GEC Geography People Animals Way of life Development Grows and expands
<u>Veronica</u> Female White Proficient	People Place	Community Together Home	People Products Government Laws Decisions Personality Place where you would be you Ruler	Place People GEC Home Crops Animals Interesting things Different	Place Kings People Communicate Markets GEC Leaders Strong
<u>Michael</u> Male White Basic	Organized Controlling your instinct	Place People live	Place Ruler King, Pharaoh Own inventions Government	People Challenges Disasters Ruled	People Together Help Best
<u>Michael</u> Male Black Basic	People Different groups	Place State City	Countries GEC Kings Recreation	Country King Soldiers Problems and success New things make life better	People Ruler GEC Geography
<u>Kevin</u> Male White Basic	Buildings	Place Ruler	People Community Army Government King, Pharaoh	People Place Ruled Government Religion	Place Way of life Protection Government Fun
<u>Miguel</u> Male Hispanic Below Basic	Countries	Country	Place Work together Make it bigger	People Places Items Salt Weapons Culture School	Place Develop Ideas Stronger and better Trade equally Food Religion Laws
<u>Shanise</u> Female Black Below Basic	People Fairness and rights	Place People live Ways of life	Place Grow in GEC	GEC Resources Better place Trade Grows Place People	Grows GEC Technology Army Trade From nothing into fantastic things
<u>John</u> Male Black Below Basic	Culture	People Different ranks	People Makes a city Ruler GEC Laws	People Place Work Organized Care	Community People Work Geography GEC

Appendix 3: Responses - Not Highly Engaged Students

Student	1-August	2-October	3-December	4-March	5-May
<u>Natasha</u> Female Black Basic	Something hope for	Place People live	Place Live together Language	Place People Together	Place 100+ People Together
<u>Kathleen</u> Female White Basic	Place Culture City	Community Work Trade	Community Working together	People Together Prosper Food Water Work	Together Living place Thrive Food Work Better
<u>Tia</u> Female Black Basic	Old gathering	Place People live Stick together	People Help each other Government		Leader People supposed to get along Market days Disasters
<u>Marc</u> Male White Below Basic	Uncertain	Place People live	Place Live together Peace Food		GEC Religion Making things
<u>Tanika</u> Female Black Below Basic	Agreements	People Work together	Country	Countries back then	People Together Boats Craftmen Weapons Laws Symbols
<u>Kayla</u> Female White Proficient	Together To accomplish	People Coming together		People Together Help	People Together Trade Grows Making Ships Crops Money
<u>Steven</u> Male Black Basic	People Work Help together	People Together Community Ruler Disasters	People Helping each other Communicate	People Together Build	People Together
<u>Sarena</u> Female Black Basic	Civil right	Place People Food	City Pharaoh Products	People Together Community	Place People Together Peace Stick up for other people
<u>Amber</u> Female White Proficient	People Made and now dead	Place People Crops Sell stuff Work Religion	Unreadable	Make Together Build better	Trade Leader Army Resources People
<u>Tybee</u> Male White Basic	Place Lots of people Authority	Freedom People obey Laws Defend self	People Jobs Laws	People United	People Develops Stronger Succeed
<u>Ryan</u> Male Black Basic	Community	Place Community Schools Church Business People	People Its needs	Place People Live Work Communicate	Place People Organized Necessities Merchants Doctors Transportation Police
<u>Tommy</u> Male White Below Basic	People Happy	Place People live	Community Ruler People	Place People Work	Community People Different personalities Work

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