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Sin Boldly! or, First Year Experience “Big History” in 21st Century Liberal Education

by Mojgan Behmand

Big History is rapidly emerging as a new global discipline¹ whose adoption into diverse educational models is advocated by a rich array of voices, from those of educators and artists to industrialists² and spiritualists.³ Of those voices, some concern themselves primarily with higher education and, in turn, almost unanimously

¹ I am indeed taking the bold step of asserting that Big History is a clearly distinct discipline. It is not merely interdisciplinary but transdisciplinary, as in in coalescing the many disciplines it draws on it becomes more than the sum of its parts.

² Bill Gates and his company bgC3 began funding and developing the Big History Project in 2010 which aims to make available an online and free Big History curriculum for high school students. More at www.bighistoryproject.com.

³ This paper was first given as a shorter presentation entitled “First Year Experience “Big History” as the Cornerstone of a 21st Century Liberal Education” at the inaugural conference of the International Big History Association (IBHA) at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, August 2-5, 2012.

advocate for the inclusion of Big History into general education programs or core curricula. Unfortunately, the unanimity ends there. Bemoaning the politics and territoriality of higher education, many of these advocates feel forced to bow to institutional realities and the ever-continuous competition for turf and resources; and thus aspirations and hopes are reduced to that which is deemed possible in a hostile environment. Inevitably, the advocate is faced with questions, such as: What is it? Is it history? Is it a social science course? Should it be an interdisciplinary elective? Will it kill World History? Doesn't it really belong in the category of myth and narrative? So, inevitably, the advocate's search for an available niche begins.

Searching for an appropriate niche is indeed the pragmatic approach often necessitated by the realities of academia. Many of us have toiled in the narrow corridors of academia long enough to be conscious of the restrictions and obstacles we face almost daily. Yet, all that past experience notwithstanding, this paper is an exhortation to expand our aspirations beyond mere niche-seeking. To paraphrase a former colleague of mine⁴, "Let Us Sin Boldly!" Let us not argue for a mere inclusion in general education but demand a place at the center of it. Let us not be content to

⁴ Dave Williams. *Sin Boldly! Dr. Dave's Guide to Writing the College Paper*. 2nd Ed. New York: Basic Books, 2004. Print.

reach 2 or 5% of our student body but demand 100%. Let us not be cowed by higher education politics but use its intricacies to our advantage. How, you ask? Well, below is my recipe. Admittedly, it is a recipe most suited to U.S. American colleges and universities, specifically small ones. Why this specific type of institution? These institutions have two qualities that make them especially suitable: they have a commitment to Liberal Education and they are of a size that facilitates implementing change. Nevertheless, my recommendations contain some universally applicable principles for all faculty and institutions interested in incorporating Big History. Consider the following steps:

1. **Big History in Liberal Education**—Argue for Big History as a core component of a liberal education suited to the demands of the 21st century.
2. **Big History in No Man’s Land**—Find a place within the general education component of liberal education that is not traditionally “owned” by a department.
3. **Big History and Building Alliances**—Build alliances across ranks and across campus to promote and protect Big History.

1. Big History in Liberal Education

Big History enthusiasts wholeheartedly support the idea of Big History as a staple in higher education curricula. So, what strategy might ensure a wide reach for this emerging discipline? My answer is an encouragement to sin boldly! Argue for Big History as a core component of a liberal education suited to the demands of the 21st century. And make that argument where it is most effective, to an audience of leaders and administrators in higher education.

An example of a target audience for an argument based in liberal education—in the United States and any nation influenced by the U.S. model of liberal education—would be the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the leading North American association concerned with undergraduate education in all manner of accredited colleges and universities. It currently has 1,250 member institutions nationally and internationally⁵ and wields tremendous power through its publications, conferences, and use of specific survey instruments. More importantly, in 2005, it launched the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, “a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a

⁵ “The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)”
<http://www.aacu.org/about/index.cfm>. Web. Accessed 07/31/2012.

twenty-first century liberal education—for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.”⁶ This initiative, LEAP, has articulated a definition of the 21st century Liberal Education and stipulated its desired learning outcomes.

The discussion of Liberal Education in the United States and its desired outcomes go back to the Founding Fathers. In 1778, Thomas Jefferson had supported the “more general diffusion of knowledge” through a bill whose preamble explained that “it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.”⁷ The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and its LEAP initiative have retained the core notion of

⁶ “Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP)” <http://www.aacu.org/leap/index.cfm>. Web. Accessed 07/31/2012.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson. “Preamble to a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” Fall 1778 Papers 2:526--27 The Founders' Constitution, Volume 1, Chapter 18, Document 11, The University of Chicago Press.

The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. Edited by Julian P. Boyd et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950--.

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s11.html>.

obligation and responsibility while redefining Liberal Education for the 21st century,

as:

an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.⁸

This definition is followed by a nuanced articulation of the four “Essential Learning Outcomes” of Liberal Education. In brief they are

1. Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World;
2. Intellectual and Practical Skills;
3. Personal and Social Responsibility; and

⁸ “What Is Liberal Education?” AAC&U. <http://www.aacu.org/leap>. Web. Accessed 07/31/2012.

4. Integrative and Applied Learning.⁹

That first Essential Learning Outcome is our key to sinning boldly. The long version reads “Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World—Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts [and] *Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.*”¹⁰ There we have it! Big History is unique in that its expansive narrative draws on the sciences and humanities, such that these disciplines become married to one another as we engage our students in 13.7 billion years of natural and human history. Big History as a foundational course is tailor-made to respond to Essential Learning Outcome 1 in a holistic manner. Thus, it also counteracts the frequently lamented fragmentation of ordinary general education distribution models. What better than Big History to provide young college-age students with a vast framework for the scaffolding of knowledge? So let us sin boldly! Argue for being central to Liberal Education; then demand a place at the center of Liberal Education.

⁹ “Essential Learning Outcomes.” AAC&U.
http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/Introduction_to_LEAP. Web. Accessed 07/31/2012.

¹⁰ “Essential Learning Outcomes.” AAC&U
http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/Introduction_to_LEAP.pdf. Web. Accessed 07/31/2012.

2. Big History in No Man's Land

It is all very well to argue for Big History's central place in Liberal Education but all our good intentions might be for naught if the inclusion of Big History is seen as the death knell for a specific program or course. Avoid the pitfalls of seeking a place in already crowded General Education categories and stirring fears regarding the further division of already scarce resources. How many of us have heard the question: "What needs to go in order for Big History to come?" There is a place within the general education component of liberal education that is not traditionally "owned" by a department. That is the first year programming. In fact, freshman seminars are amongst the lauded High Impact Practices¹¹ and yet, in many ways, the freshman seminar is a neglected tradition of Liberal education. Notably, over the last thirty years, the National Resource Center in South Carolina and its First Year Experience conferences have achieved much by bringing together a vast number of experts and participants annually to share and learn information regarding freshman seminars. Yet, the First Year Experience conference shows very clearly that a multitude of programs exist, but that our freshman seminars are a disparate group of courses that have

¹¹ George D. Kuh. "High-Impact Educational Practices: A Brief Overview" excerpted from *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington D.C.: AAC&U, 2008. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm>. Web. Accessed 12/28/2012.

generally moved away from teaching foundational content. Rather, these courses can carry 1-6 units, are skills-based instead of content-based, and draw intermittently and without consistency on full- and part-time faculty of various disciplines.¹² It seems that in giving up Eurocentric courses like Western Civilization or even text-focused courses such as the Great Books, universities might have given up too much: both foundational content and a common intellectual experience. Big History is the foundational content for the 21st century as it is the story of all of us while it celebrates and explains diversity.

It will take some careful negotiation—and the issue of building alliances for such negotiations will be discussed next—but piloting a Big History course within this framework is not as Herculean a feat as it might be elsewhere. And, if designed thoughtfully, such a freshman seminar addresses Essential Learning Outcome 2 “Intellectual and Practical Skills” by including primarily “Written and oral communication” and “Information literacy”. Furthermore, the Big History concepts of interconnectedness and interdependence promote reflection on Essential Learning

¹² Keup, Jennifer and Joni Petschauer, *The First Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning & Success. Designing and Implementing the Course*, vol. 1. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2011.

Outcome 3 “Personal and Social Responsibility.” In a Fall 2012 Big History survey¹³ administered at Dominican University, after only one semester of Big History 72% of the students surveyed indicated that their Big History experience had changed the way they saw or understood aspects of the world. That changed perspective ranged from seeing “the ‘bigger picture,’ or how all things are complex and interconnected” to “my role in the vast universe” to “the future of Earth and/or humanity.” Indeed, the study of millennia of collective learning and exchange networks has a disorienting effect that increases the scope of students’ perspective as the course culminates in a study of possible scenarios for our shared future and emphasizes individual agency in affecting change.

Obviously, a Big History freshman seminar is uniquely suited to respond to the lofty goals of Liberal Education. And let us be bold! As said before, let us not be content to reach 2 or 5% of our student body but demand 100%. Argue for an entire first-year program. After all, we are sinning boldly. A Big History-based first-year program might just achieve the following: 1) allow the Big History advocate to circumvent troublesome institutional politics while providing room for innovation; 2)

¹³ Our thanks are due to Richard Blundell, PhD candidate at Macquarie University, Australia, for sharing his Big History-specific survey with us and allowing us to modify it according to our needs.

function as a necessary foundation for the student who needs help in the scaffolding of fragmented knowledge; and, 3) such a program would also be a high-impact-practice freshman seminar that if offered on a large scale would also constitute a common intellectual experience for the student body.

3. Big History and Building Alliances

In order to promote Big History, it is essential to build alliances across ranks and across campus. Remember: “networking” is not a dirty word! Let us enlist the support of university administration, faculty, and staff. At meetings and conferences, the Big History enthusiast often preaches to the converted—faculty with similar interdisciplinary interests who are in agreement but may lack the tools to affect change at their institution—or to World Historians—faculty who might be apprehensive of a grand narrative or fear that Big History might attempt to replace World History. Both fears are justified and need to be allayed. Perhaps, a great first step might be to not think of Big History as a history course/discipline but rather, as suggested above, as a foundational course/discipline. While rethinking this course’s discipline and place, we must also recognize that winning over the institution’s administration is essential for large-scale and impactful adoption, so we must network and offer the right incentives.

Let us aim for the support of the institution's leaders. Presidents, provosts, and deans care about educational vision, innovation, and also fundraising. These are often engendered through transformative educational models that align with the institute's mission. Leaders new to the institute frequently seek change, many undertaking curricular innovation and general education revision. Big History has enormous potential and equally impressive malleability. Is there a university leader who can be an advocate for change? And what aspect of Big History might align with her/his vision and the institute's mission? Do continue to preach the good of Big History to colleagues but also do so at conferences that target administrators and faculty with administrative duties, i.e. the decision-makers on a campus.

Another important resource is the faculty and faculty leadership on campus. Many harbor a hidden passion and desire to escape the confines, or even isolation, of a discipline or position on campus. And they entered academia to serve the greater good. They are idealists with a love for learning. Appeal to these characteristics. Be bold! You may openly demand curricular change on campus; but accompany that with small-scale conversations and negotiations that gain the support of faculty leadership and members of curricular committees. A helpful hint: sometimes those holding official positions do not wield the greatest power. Seek the support of influential senior faculty. In addition, staff involved in teaching and excellence centers, i.e. faculty

developers, are often agents for change on campus; and they may have the ability to offer grants in support of new course or program development. While doing all the above, be cognizant of the fact that many of us in academia are overworked and quickly depleted of reserves of energy. In such a state, large-scale change can demand too much of us, so don't be disappointed or become disillusioned if your colleagues or institutional leaders do not catch the Big History bug right away. Don't give up!

Consider modeling the major Big History concepts as you work for its implementation. Collective learning and exchange networks define the human history section of Big History. Creating a Big History community on campus can bring these concepts to life. Dominican University's administrators and faculty function as a great example of that. Once the administration, Board of the Trustees, and the faculty were won over to support Big History, a learning community of faculty emerged.¹⁴ Our annual Big History Summer Institute hosts approximately 25 faculty of all disciplines. All participants contribute to the development of the program through their expertise

¹⁴ A number of universities employ the rotational model for their Big History courses, most notably David Christian's course at Macquarie University in Australia and Fred Spier's course at Amsterdam University in the Netherlands. These professors invite scholars from various fields to lecture on specific sections of the course in greater depth. This is also a great example of collective learning. Dominican University, however, opted for another model which it found more suited to a first-year program which focuses on active, student-centered learning and allows students to bond more with the individual instructor.

in their field and pedagogy, but they are not required to teach in the program. Thus, First Year Experience “Big History” at Dominican University of California has become a one-year course sequence based on Big History that employs active teaching strategies, incorporates the teaching of skills, and prompts students to ask the big questions and articulate an understanding of their own place in the universe. Our collective learning and collaborative methods have propelled us forward at an exponential rate and allowed for consistent improvement. Currently, we are writing our own book on pedagogy, *Teaching Big History*.

In conclusion, we at Dominican University sinned boldly in that we launched a program that envisioned more than a Big History course. We created a course sequence around Big History and accompanied it with co- and extra-curricular activities. All our freshmen take Big History. And we engage administrators, faculty, and staff, currently reaching out to Advancement and Admissions. Our program is innovative—even disruptive—in its form of delivering liberal education and reaching for the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes. My recommendations, the explanations that follow them, and the concrete examples all draw on North America realities but my contention is that the principles are transferable to other regions. Hence my words: go forth and sin boldly!

Dr. Behmand earned her MA and PhD in English and American Studies at the University of Dusseldorf, Germany with minors in Medieval Studies and Political Science. She has been teaching in Dominican University of California's department of Literature & Languages since 2007, with an affinity for specialty courses on 19th century women's literature and Gothic novels. In January of 2010 she was appointed Director of General Education and First Year Experience at Dominican and began ambitiously renovating our first-year programming to center on the Big History narrative. The same year, she was elected by her students as Dominican's Teacher of the Year. Dr. Behmand has published and presented numerous papers on Big History pedagogy and faculty development at a variety of conferences, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference, First Year Experience Conference, the World History Association Conference, the Professional and Organizational Development Network Conference, the International Big History Association Conference, the Asian Association of World Historians Conference, and the California World History Association Conference, among others.