The Little Big History Project (LBH)

In Big History, we have looked at large-scale processes over great swathes of time; we have traversed multiple disciplines; and we have dealt with thresholds that have far-reaching repercussions. In order to really see these BIG changes, we have occasionally looked closely at specific case studies like the significance of the eugenics movement, Galileo’s challenge to the geocentric model of the universe, the role of a particular chemical element in human society, or the commonalities and differences in the first agrarian civilizations. In a similar way, you will research an area of interest and trace it over time, paying attention to our big history ideas but digging deeper into a specific topic. To use a metaphor, we have spent a great deal of time looking at how the forest has been shaped over time, but now we want you to examine a single tree: how did the soil that the oak tree is growing in get there? How did that seed grow? How did the tree provide shelter for many life forms? Why was it chopped down? How was it then made into a classroom table? So literally, we are thinking LITTLE but still looking at BIG scales.

GOALS:

1. Dig deeply into an area of interest and produce a research paper of five-to-six pages in length.
2. Share your research and understandings with a wider audience.

1 Much of the prose, design and process for this research project have been adapted from the work of Deb Johnston and Keith Klingler, two pioneer teachers of Big History at the Lakeside School in Seattle.
Basic Outline for the LBH project

Task #1: Brainstorming and Selecting a Topic. This process will unfold prior to spring break. You must complete the Topic Proposal Worksheet (see below) by Friday 3/3. I will finalize and approve your topic before you leave for spring break.

Task #2: Research (all of these steps are outlined in greater detail below).

   A. Generate TEN questions about your approved topic, due Friday 3/31.
   B. Initial Research and Source Collection, due Friday 4/7. Complete worksheet for Part B of Initial Research (see below). You must also generate at least 5 annotated sources on NoodleTools.
   C. Research and Note Taking. You must generate 35-40 notecards in NoodleTools (can include images, data/statistics, short quotes, paraphrase/summary cards, and thought/idea cards) and increase your total of annotated sources on NoodleTools to ten, due Friday 4/14.

Task #3: Outlining, Writing and Revising (all of these steps are outlined in greater detail below).

   A. Your concept map and preliminary thesis is due Friday 4/21.
   B. The first draft of your paper is due Friday 4/28.
   C. The final draft of your paper is due Friday 5/12.

Task #4: Presentation

A slideshow presentation and screencast of your research is due Thursday 5/18. Each student will give a 10-12 minutes presentation of their topic during the final four days of classes.
Task #1: Brainstorming and Selecting a Topic (due Friday, March 3)

A. Choose possible topics

Select and evaluate three potential topics. A good topic will be a specific object/artifact, activity, living organism/natural or processed resource or place that has been profoundly shaped by human collective learning over time.

Here are just a few examples of the range of possible topics. A recommendation is to start with something specific (say an iPhone) and trace it back to a broader “parent” category (like telephone, electronic communications, currents and electricity).

**Object/Artifact:** an Olympic Silver Medal, a Tour de France bicycle, an Apple iphone or an AK-47 automatic rifle.

**Activity:** the Boston Marathon, a Grateful Dead Concert, Hydraulic Fracturing or “Fracking,” or stock trading on Wall Street.

**Living Organism/Natural or Processed Resource:** free-trade coffee, thoroughbred horses, M&M’s, Ben and Jerry’s ice cream.

**Place:** a clear-cut section of the Amazon Rainforest, the Brooklyn Bridge, a gated suburban community, Tokyo subway station, Mount Rushmore.

As you consider a topic, do a little research on it (using the library databases or even wiki) to see what the topic encompasses.

Ask yourself the following questions as you evaluate your topic:

a. How long have people been using ________________?

b. Where and how did it originate? What were the goldilocks conditions involved?

c. How has it or its use changed over time? Can I trace it back through four or more thresholds?

d. What were the major changes in its form and use?

e. How global is your topic? How many different people and places does it touch? How have people from various societies and cultures used it?

f. How does the concept of increasing complexity fit this object/artifact, activity, living thing/natural resource or place?

g. How did collective learning aid in the understanding of this topic?

Ultimately, when choosing a topic, make certain that you can generate a paper that:

(1) Contains a narrative that **communicates your understanding of Big History concepts:**

   Goldilocks’ Conditions, increasing complexity, collective learning. This will require you to
document change over time by **crossing at least four Big History thresholds**. Further, you must relate your topic to the present, making a connection to the 21st century.

(2) Uses a **multi-disciplinary approach**, drawing from history and two other fields (anthropology, astronomy, economics, etc.) Keep in mind that you are generating a historical document. However, your supporting evidence or ideas may come from other disciplines.

(3) **Spans more than one culture or society**. All of the topics touch more than one group of people. Weave threads that draw out relationships between them.

(4) Builds an argument supported with the **best available scholarly evidence including both secondary and primary sources**.

Complete the topic proposal form below and share with your teacher by class on the assigned date. For each topic, you must write a brief paragraph (4-6 sentences) that provides a rationale for why this is a promising topic. Make sure you choose potential topics you feel passionately about. Put your three possible topics in order of preference. I will read and approve your topics over the weekend. Consider your choices carefully, as you will be working on this topic for much of the spring trimester. Break some academic sweat when it comes to thinking about your rationale. The quality of your Big History connections and the creativity of your selection will matter.
Task #2: Research

A. Brainstorm 10 guiding questions (due Friday, March 31).

Create a list of ten questions that could be asked about your approved topic. Consider which of these questions allow you to create the best Little Big History narrative that incorporates the criteria above. These questions will guide your inquiry. YOU DO NOT NEED TO KNOW THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS NOW!

Below are frameworks for generating questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry Pattern</th>
<th>Question Prompts</th>
<th>Examples for Topic: Silver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Values &amp; Perspectives</td>
<td>What differing perspectives could be explored?</td>
<td>How would looking at silver from the perspective of a Bolivian miner be different from that of a Chinese government official or a Spanish conquistador?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>Is there an effect whose cause(s) could be explored? Think about this in terms of Goldilocks Conditions.</td>
<td>What effect did the Chinese use of silver to pay taxes have on the global silver market? How did silver lead to the exploitation of forced labor in the Americas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change and continuity over time</td>
<td>How has this changed or stayed the same over time? Think about it in terms of complexity.</td>
<td>How did the value and use of silver change over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>Is there a comparison that could be made between how that commodity, place, or activity has evolved over time? (Remember comparisons are similarities and differences.)</td>
<td>Compare the demand for silver in the 1600's with the demand for oil in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Compare Potosi in 1400 and Potosi in 1600 and 1800.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>What difference does this make in the world?</td>
<td>How did silver in the 16\textsuperscript{th} -18\textsuperscript{th} centuries improve the lives of some, and destroy the lives of others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heuristic or Speculative</td>
<td>Think about a trend you see. What would happen to this in the future if...?</td>
<td>Given the finite sources of silver, what might be a precious metal of the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Investigation</td>
<td>Is there an event, process, or time in the past that could be explored in greater depth as you consider the broader narrative?</td>
<td>Look specifically at the Manila trade in silver—how did this demonstrate that the Chinese still controlled the global economy in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical</td>
<td>What are the ethical, environmental, and/or moral implications of these changes over time?</td>
<td>What are the health risks associated with the mining of silver?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Initial Research and Source Collection (due Friday 4/7).

Begin with a general reference reading (Encyclopedia, Specialized Reference Books, Wikipedia) in order to generate a specific list of topics and keywords and determine how you will need to narrow (or perhaps broaden) your research.

Keywords for topic:

Use the Library Research Guide for this project to conduct your search. You must use at least one journal article (print or online) and two online databases.

List of Promising Journals and Databases

Additional Checklist to complete by Friday 4/7:

______ Add at least 5 sources to NoodleTools.

______ Be sure to find information from more than one society (in different parts of world).

______ Be sure to find information and evidence that crosses at least FOUR Big History Thresholds. You might consider grouping your notecard evidence by threshold.

______ Be sure to find information from at least THREE disciplines (History and two others). Use the databases to help explore journals from a variety of disciplines.

______ Keep track of good images for your appendix and your slideshow (use your notecards to do this.)
C. Research and Note Taking

Now that you have a firm understanding of your topic and secured several sources, research can begin in earnest. Work through the following checklist. **By Friday 4/14, your research should be complete with 35-40 notecards generated and at least 10 annotated sources in your Works Cited list on Noodletools.**

1. For each of your sources, take notes on key ideas.
2. Be sure to paraphrase or use quotations marks to avoid plagiarism. (See notes below on that.)
3. Edit quotes down to passages that are pithy (relatively short and to the point) and profound. Much of the facts and evidence you find in sources are probably better recorded through paraphrasing or summary.
4. Each notecard should contain only one idea.
5. It is helpful after quotes or key ideas to insert your own thinking. Own your research.
6. Your notes should become more focused as the direction of your research sharpens. You will invariably end up taking some notes on material that you won’t end up using. That’s OK—it is part of research.
7. Your Appendix should include at least 3 images (but no more than 10). Be sure to track these as you research – using perhaps maps, timelines, and images.
8. By the end, you will have a variety of sources: news and magazine articles, science and history journals, data base PDF’s, Big History videos, graphs or charts, maps, images etc. that come from at least three disciplines over a large time span.
9. Make sure that your notecards include both primary and secondary source evidence—both of which are required elements of this project.
10. Do not use Wikipedia as an authoritative source—which means you can use it for background info, but do not cite it as evidence in your paper.
11. We will provide more specific guidelines for source integration and documentation—including dos and don’ts regarding proper attribution and citation—at a later date.
Task #3: Outlining, Writing and Revising (outline/thesis due Friday 4/21, first draft due Friday 4/28, and final draft due Friday 5/12).

You will create an outline for your project and then write first and final drafts of your paper. The final guidelines are detailed below.

Your final paper (5-6 pages, 1 ½ spaced, Times New Roman, 12pt) should include:

A. A thesis paragraph in which you articulate your argument and provide a clear sense of the key elements of your proof.

B. Body paragraphs, each of which is firmly connected to your thesis and centered around a clear topic sentence and supporting evidence.

C. A conclusion that reiterates your argument in a new way while offering some final important connection or insight.

D. Overall, your paper must:
   - Include **Big History concepts**: Goldilock’s Conditions, increasing complexity, collective learning.
   - **Document change over time by crossing at least four Big History thresholds** (including pre-Threshold 5).
   - Relate your topic to the present.
   - **Use a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing from history and two other fields** (anthropology, astronomy, economics, etc.)
   - Span more than one human society or culture.
   - Include at least three images in an Appendix. Refer to these in your text as Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 etc. Be sure that all images are cited with captions.
   - **Document evidence using footnotes and an Annotated Works Cited list in MLA Style.** You should use at least 10 distinct sources in this paper.
Task #4: Slideshow Presentation and Screencast (due Thursday 5/18)

You will create a slideshow that will summarize your research and findings. As a means to practice your presentation and to preserve your topic for future classes, you will create a screencast first of your presentation.

- Make certain you highlight the Big History concepts that were involved in your writing, including: the four or more thresholds; instances of Goldilocks’ Conditions and Increasing Complexity; the relationship to the present; the different disciplines on which you touched.
- This slideshow will be heavy on images and light on text, although key ideas can be made in bullet points.
- Image sources and quotes must be cited on the slide.
- The presentation should be designed to take 10 - 12 minutes and be delivered without reading from the screen; you will seek to convince your audience what was interesting about your topic. You are the expert on this topic!
- Both the slideshow and the screencast should be submitted to your LBH Google folder by the due date. I will devise a schedule for presentations that will occupy our final four days of classes.