



Constructing Timelines

The BHH Five Processes

WHY: Timelines play a major role in Bringing History Home classrooms. They help students understand the chronology of historic events, and help students situate newly encountered events and figures in relation to those they've already studied. They provide a visual aid for identifying cause and effect relationships between events, and they provide a visual prompt to activate student prior knowledge. They allow students to recognize how historic events, eras and topics overlap in time, they provide a visual representation of similar or related events that can be categorized into themes, eras, and topics, and they can help students compare elements in different time periods.

All of these purposes are important singly, and collectively they help students develop a long-range understanding of historic chronology. Researchers have found that students too often encounter little bits and pieces of history devoid of context and unconnected to larger historic themes.ⁱ Consequently, students fail to develop a sense of historic era; they fail “to conceive of event-space in ways that allow them to construe each part in relation to the whole.”ⁱⁱ

This affects not only students' grasp of history topics, however; it also limits their engagement in critical analysis. As a recent middle school study found, “Without proper background knowledge, students have difficulty developing the contexts for historical thinking.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In Bringing History Home, timelines are constructed by students. Shiny store-bought timelines might be posted in a BHH class, way up high by the ceiling to cover a bit of water stain or dull paint on the wall, but the BHH timeline is made of butcher paper and covered in student drawings, primary sources, and recipe-sized cards noting laws and events. Or sometimes it's made of rope; its images, dates and documents hang from paper clips and clothes pins. Sometimes the main BHH classroom timeline is supplemented by smaller poster board-sized lines that include only a few elements, such as changes in farming over time, changes in environmental regulation, or a chronology of legislation related to voting rights and disenfranchisement. Always, though, because BHH timelines are constructed by students, they reflect the students' own learning.

WHO: Give your students as much input into the timeline as possible. At the end of each day's history exploration, ask your students which events and/or figures they think should be placed on the line, and how they should be represented. Invite your students to take turns illustrating pictures for the line, or choosing which primary sources they wish to use to represent their learning.



WHAT: When deciding which elements to put on your timeline, it's better to err on the side of generosity than stinginess.. The more elements on your line, the better it reflects your class' learning, at least if you are engaged in rich history explorations. Don't limit your dates to history...include elements from other disciplines, too; language arts , science, music, math; if you encounter a historic topic in one of those areas, add it to the class line. If a student finds something at home that relates to history, invite them to add it to the line. A dynamic, messy, full-to-the-brim timeline is a sign of a class that's engaged in history full-tilt.

WHEN: Start your classroom timeline at *the beginning* of the school year. Add to it throughout the year.

WHERE: Your class timeline should be displayed as prominently as possible in your room, and should be easily reached for adding new elements. If it's hard to reach, you'll be less likely to add elements daily. But if you don't have space in your classroom for your timeline, try hanging it in the hallway near your class.

HOW: Every day or two, begin your history study with a review of the timeline. Settle your students on the floor in front of the line and invite them to do a silent "walk and talk" of the events on the line. Allow a minute or two for this activity, then invite a student to stand and do a walk-and-talk aloud. The students don't need to account for every element on the line; they should just use the elements as prompts to tell a story about a particular era or theme, or inventory various things that were happening during the same time period.

Your students will use the line spontaneously as well, to situate new evidence in relation to what they've already studied, or to infer the timing of new information that lacks a date.



Selected Research Studies

Graphic Organizers

Darch, C.B. et. al. (1986). The role of graphic organizers and social structure in content area instruction. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, v.18, n.4, pp.275-295.

Griffin, C., et. al. (1995). Effects of graphic organizer instruction on fifth-grade students.

Journal of Educational Research; v.89, n.2, pp.98-107.

Griffin, C. & Tulbert, B. (1995). The effect of graphic organizers on students' comprehension and recall of expository text: A review of the research and implications for practice. *Reading and Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*; v.11, n.1, pp.73-89.

Robinson, D. & Kiewra, K. (1996). Visual argument: Graphic organizers are superior to outlines in improving learning from text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, v.87, n.3, pp.455-467.

Sources Cited

ⁱ Barton, K. (2002) "Oh, that's a tricky piece!": Children, mediated action, and the tools of historical time. *The Elementary School Journal*, v.103, n.2.

ⁱⁱ Shemilt, D. (2000) The Caliph's Coin: The currency of narrative frameworks in history teaching. *Knowing, teaching & learning history*, eds. Stearns, P. et. al., New York: New York University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Twyman, T., et.al. (2006) Using concepts to frame history content. *The Journal of experimental education*, 74 (4), 331-349.