



World History Project and Granada Hills Charter

World History Project offers common ground and frequent wins for learners of all types

Granada Hills Charter (GHC), in the northern part of Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, is one of the country's largest charter schools. At 4,750 students, it is also one of the most diverse, with 64 languages spoken in students' homes. Since the Big History Project (BHP) course was introduced in 2013, teachers have discovered a natural fit with the school's co-teaching model, which supports students with learning disabilities within the general education classroom, and they have nurtured the connection between the BHP curriculum and the school's goals. When the new GHC middle school opens next year, it's likely BHP will continue to be taught there. The high school, though, has already made the switch to the World History Project (WHP) course for about half of its tenth-grade students.

Building on a foundation in historical thinking

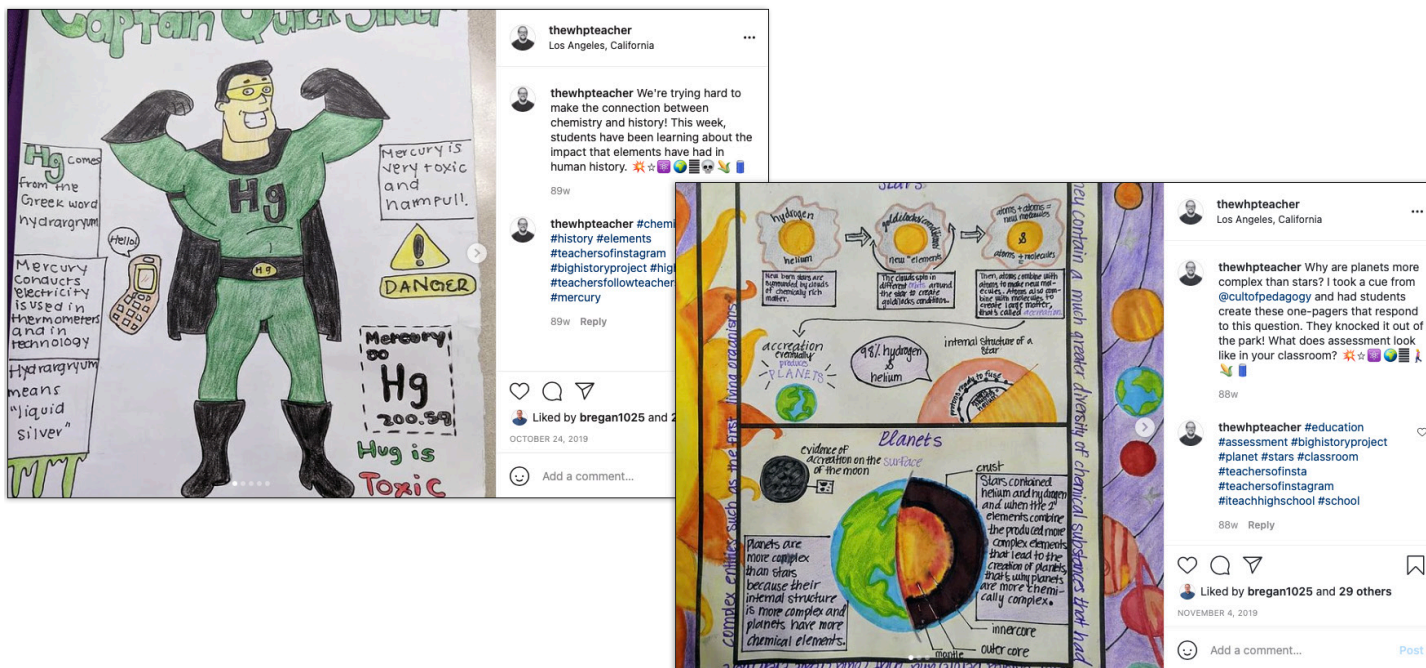
Erik Christensen was not the *first* teacher at his school to use BHP's course materials but—in the same way Aretha Franklin was not the first to sing *R-E-S-P-E-C-T*—he kind of nailed it. Five years ago, just two days before school started, Christensen was hired as a new teacher but fully formed grown-up with a previous career in the Los Angeles construction, architecture, and engineering sector. For his history class, he was given two options: Teach "anything you want" or try this Big History thing, which some classes were using, and which has all the lessons laid out in order but is still flexible. To Christensen, it was a no-brainer. "It was love at first sight," he says, "and I've run with it pretty hard ever since then." He even worked with BHP staff



GHC teacher Erik Christensen. Photo OER Project



as our first ever “Instagram teacher,” helping to spread ideas that might be useful to other teachers and students using the course.



Examples of BHP course content posted by Erik Christensen on Instagram.

Fast forward to 2020 and OER Project’s release of the World History Project (WHP) course. WHP builds on the foundational historical thinking skills established in BHP. “At GHC, Big History Project will return at the middle-school level, and World History Project is in full effect at the high school,” says Christensen, who is one of four history teachers using WHP in tenth-grade classes. The massive school has approximately 1,000 students taking world history, with nearly half in classes that use WHP.

A world of opportunity to see progress

Many classes at Granada use an inclusion model for instruction, and in Christensen’s classroom about 40 percent of students have learning disabilities. His co-teacher, Straun Joseph, provides instructional supports and accommodations for the students with learning disabilities. The two teachers collaborate to plan lessons, assess students, and teach class for the day. Joseph has found that the students with learning disabilities find a world of opportunity with WHP’s offerings because there are so many ways for students to show what they’ve learned. “When it comes to the writing skills, especially the Three Close Reads and DBQs [document-based questions] our kids excel,” says Joseph.

Joseph is referring here to two of BHP’s and WHP’s most popular scaffolding tools. Despite the initial eye-roll nearly all students give to the idea of reading the same thing three times—first reading for gist, then for deeper understanding, and finally for conceptual takeaways—the process eventually becomes a habit highly valued by students. Likewise, the document-based questions help students advance their

writing skills because of how they are scaffolded throughout the course, building students' writing proficiency one skill at a time.

"The way we're able to break it down, step by step, they really like it," says Joseph. And they like watching their scores rise. He stresses that when students with learning disabilities see their improvement—especially when that hasn't occurred in other learning environments—their excitement takes off.

Christensen says this holds true for the class as a whole too. He concedes that it takes some cheerleading on his part during those early weeks when students realize they may have more writing to do in his class than in their English class, but that vanishes once they start to see their own progress. "The responses from the students are overwhelmingly positive about the overall amount of writing they do in this course."

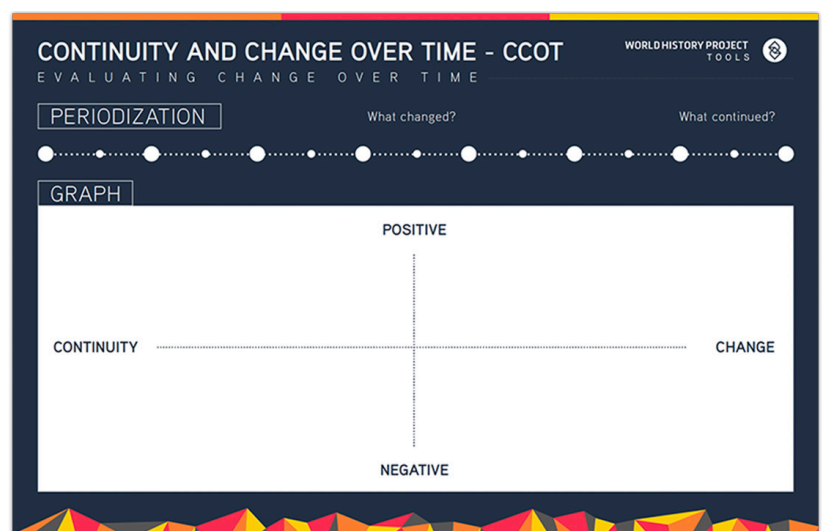
An exciting and flexible learning environment

WHP's differentiation tools and scaffolding materials are useful in supporting all types of learners. Christensen has found that students across the board rely on the audio versions of the articles, video transcripts, and especially the multiple Lexile-leveled texts offered in the course. Christensen has gathered a great deal of anecdotal data showing how likely his students are to naturally gravitate to the appropriate Lexile reading levels. "We tell them, 'That reading level? That's like your car. Nobody cares about it except for you, so pick what works for you.'" What matters to Erik is that students understand what the text says so they can move on to working with the many important historical skills the content supports.

The obvious enthusiasm both Christensen and Joseph have for this type of differentiation has created an exciting and flexible learning environment, even when distance learning is mandated.

A life raft of skills

Was 2020 the best year to start teaching WHP? We'll never know, but in the case of Granada Hills Charter, teaching the historical concepts and skills that OER Project prioritizes—such as CCOT (continuity and change over time), claim testing, and contextualization—became a life raft in a year flooded with new challenges, ideas, fears, and good will.



Continuity and change over time poster