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## The Dominican Big History Summer Institute: A Story of Collective Learning

Mojgan Behmand

*Department of Literature and Languages, Dominican University of California,*  
mojgan.behmand@dominican.edu

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# The Dominican Big History Summer Institute: A Story of Collective Learning

A cold Tuesday afternoon in 2009 saw a group of us Dominican faculty come together with an odd mix of enthusiasm and weariness to work on curricular revision. We gathered in Dominican University's Hunt Room, surrounded by colorful murals of a posh hunt sequence featuring horses and hounds and were well aware of the power of transformation manifested even in the building itself. The summer estate residence of the de Young family—founders of the San Francisco Chronicle and the de Young Museum—had been purchased for \$10 by the ever-resourceful Dominican Sisters in 1918 and had served the purposes of education as a residential and assembly hall ever since. Now, in 2009, we were attempting another transformation: a reform of our general education curriculum. Would we rise to the occasion?

Our small sub-group had been specifically tasked with revamping our first-year programming, hence the mix of trepidation and eagerness. We were eager since we recognized the great potential of a six-unit first-year sequence, and yet we were disheartened as extensive research of other institutions had shown us the great disparity amongst freshman seminars and first-year programs. Many were skills-based; almost none were foundational. The content options that presented themselves seemed a throwback to the 1980s and '90s: Western Civilization, Great Books, or World History. All were valuable and wonderful courses and yet ....

On that Tuesday afternoon, my esteemed colleague Phil Novak entered the discussion with even more fervor than usual and for the first time we heard the term "Big History." He had carried in a heavy bag of books and now began taking them out. We heard more unfamiliar names and titles that day, and as Phil continued to describe a course that seemed to draw on astronomy, chemistry, biology, geology, anthropology, sociology, art, and history, our collective hearts sank. We shook our heads at this idealistic and impractical man, and as we left the

room, one of my colleagues quietly remarked to me, "I wouldn't want to teach that." And therein lay the crux of the argument: who would want to teach such a crazy course that obviously lacked a disciplinary home and would have instructors teaching outside their area of expertise?

Of course, the regular readers of the IBHA newsletter already know that Phil Novak carried the day, and that Dominican University developed its own version of a First Year Experience based on Big History. We did rise to the occasion and an ambitious transformation did indeed take place—with the support of our committee, the faculty, the administration, and the Board of Trustees. How did this come about? First, Phil enlisted the support of Big Historian Cynthia Brown, a professor emerita in our School of Education, who attended our sub-committee meetings regularly and engaged in inspiring conversations with us; second, we recognized the need for faculty training and preparation to teach such a course. Senior faculty on the committee used their clout to convince the



*Jaime Castner and Mojgan Behmand*



administration to fund a seven-day Big History Summer Institute in May 2010. The Summer Institute took place and the rest is Big History! Or, as I like to say, a story of collective learning.

Why collective learning? The Big History enthusiast is familiar with the concept of collective learning and the key role it plays in the human history section of Big History. And, with the adoption of our new first-year program, we Dominicans soon realized that the successful implementation of a Big History program requires actually living this key Big History theme. The schedule for our first Big History Summer Institute was hammered out by Cynthia Brown, Phil Novak, and myself, and we had included all we deemed necessary for the program: sessions on the Big History content, the incorporation of writing and research skills into the courses, the collective development of course descriptions and learning outcomes, and the possible conflict of religion and science. Cynthia Brown and I were co-facilitators and a few faculty with expertise in specific areas were also asked to teach sessions. We invited guest speakers—the inspiring cosmologist Brian Swimme, research scholar Russell Genet, and cartoonist Larry Gonick — and kicked off the event with thirty of our colleagues.

Well, our first Big History Summer Institute was a resounding success: not because it was perfect (evaluations even included complaints about chairs

and the lack of cushioning) but rather because we had exhausted ourselves with getting to know each other, learning from one another, and building community. Faculty lauded the “robust engagement with colleagues,” “the cumulative knowledge,” and the “willingness to revise and reevaluate approaches to teaching in FYE and even the creation of FYE as a whole.” We learned that collaborative work is rewarding but also demanding and at times messy. Flexibility in responding to the needs of the group was crucial. And learning from the experience meant carrying this work forward through a constant process of collaboration, revision, and refinement. The evaluations had numerous pertinent suggestions. They included requests for more “Dominican guest lecturers,” “the modeling of class sessions,” expanding the “role of philosophy, thought, story, and art in the Big History program,” and creating a balance “between optimism and doomsday.” We also emerged with the plan of having one-day retreats every semester and weekly lunch meetings.

In the 2010 Summer Institute evaluations, one prescient colleague had predicted, “Next year we will bring our experiences!” And we did exactly that in 2011. In the first year of our launch, we had learned that knowing the Big History content was very different from teaching it. Most Big History courses around the world were being taught by scholars in large-lecture format to a self-selecting student body; our program was a requirement for

all freshmen and this group of young students struggled with the abstract nature of the Big History narrative and the seemingly impersonal story of the stars and planets. Lengthy lectures were not the key to remedying that. Student evaluations also showed our students struggling with their perceived insignificance in view of this vast narrative. Of course, ending the narrative with projections for the remote future and the destruction of the world in about 5 billion years only added to this sense of futility.

By May of 2011, as our second Big History Summer Institute approached, we shifted our focus to pedagogy. How could we help students connect with this vital narrative in a personal and tangible way? The Summer Institute content was rethought to include the modeling of class sessions followed by short discussions. Emphasis was placed on interactive modules and reflective inquiry that could be incorporated into the courses where appropriate. We had also realized the need for greater agreement on the goals of the program. In 2010, we had written course descriptions and drafted learning outcomes but had never quite settled on the objectives of this First Year Experience; yet, those objectives would inevitably drive all other components. In 2011, we began our second Summer Institute with a visioning exercise in small groups where we each expressed our intended outcomes for the program and ultimately brought those together to articulate them as program goals. First Year Experience “Big History” was designed to promote:

- recognition of the personal, communal, and political implications of the Big History story, including insight into the interdependence of humans and their environment;
- critical and creative thinking in a manner that awakens curiosity, enhances openness to multiple perspectives, and increases willingness to challenge one’s own assumptions; and
- development of reading, thinking, and research skills to enhance one’s ability to evaluate and articulate understanding of one’s place in the unfolding universe.

Consistent with the pedagogical focus, faculty

shared insights and activities, many of which became staples in our program: the “Solar System Activity,” the “Skull Lab,” and the “Opinion Snake” are only three of those. Whereas the first Summer Institute had merely opened us up to collaboration, this second iteration underscored collective learning as the main force propelling us forward. Participants “appreciated ... opportunities to build community and bond with one another through engaging (playful) activities,” “being a part of a pioneering development in education that is unique to our school,” “exploration of best practices ... skillful facilitation,” and “leadership we can trust.” We entered the second year of our program with new insight and confidence, an array of in-class activities, and a number of planned co-curricular events such as lectures by cosmologist Brian Swimme and sociologist Robert Bellah and an evening of stargazing on campus with the San Francisco Amateur Astronomers. Subsequent student responses, both in surveys and reflections rewarded our efforts and showed that we were on the right path.

By the summer of 2012, as our third Big History Summer Institute approached, the demands had changed. We had refined our application process, limited the number of our participants, and opened the Summer Institute to external faculty. The focus was to remain on pedagogy but the challenge was to engage the veteran Big History instructors, teach the faculty new to Big History, and meaningfully integrate the external faculty. We welcomed



colleagues from South Korea and India and enjoyed the cross-pollination of ideas and disciplines. By now, we were also conscious of having moved exponentially fast and being in the unique position of having notable pedagogical insight in Big History because of our collective learning process. Richard Simon, Thomas Burke, and I had begun working together as writers and editors to collect and shape our faculty's contribution for publication in our own planned book on Big History pedagogy, *Teaching Big History*.

Accordingly, the Big History Summer Institute in 2012 witnessed the faculty present on effective teaching of all thresholds and specific innovative approaches to teaching thresholds 5, 6, and 7 (the latter lectures which were refined and presented at the IBHA 2012 conference and published in Dominican's own Big History e-journal *Thresholds* in January 2013); an increased focus on development of activities for each threshold; and a further delving into the intersections of religion, science, faith, and meaning. We came away with a strengthened sense of purpose and potential. As one participant observed, "Big History is a wonderful curriculum that will prepare our students to succeed not only in their university pursuits but also in developing

and attaining future goals. I feel a renewed sense of commitment to liberal arts education and excited about the possibilities for our next generation of students."

By the end of Fall 2012, Dominican faculty came to feel that their commitment had been rewarded. A new Big History survey administered to first-year students at Dominican University showed that after only one semester of Big History 80% of students thought or talked about the content of the course outside of class; 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." We had of course always hoped for such results but had not dared expect such clear evidence of Big History as a transformative experience.

So, another cold Tuesday afternoon saw a group of us Dominican faculty come together in the Hunt Room for our weekly Big History lunch meetings. The semester was drawing to an end and the fatigue of teaching and grading should have been written on all the faces. Yet the room buzzed with enthusiasm because a group of professors, idealists and believers, felt that they were making a difference in the world through the kind of education they were providing. As we sat in the room, surrounded by the colorful murals of the hunt, I thought about our Dominican heritage and history, and knew that we had indeed risen to the occasion and made palpable on our campus the transformative power of education.

To learn more about Dominican University of California's First Year Experience "Big History", visit us at <http://www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history>.

To learn more about the Dominican Big History Summer Institute or apply to attend the 2013 Summer Institute (June 17-21), visit us at <http://www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history/summer-institute> or write us at [bighistory@dominican.edu](mailto:bighistory@dominican.edu).



*Phil Novak*



# The Dominican Big History Summer Institute

