BIG HISTORY PROJECT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is big history? .........................................................................................................................2
What is the Big History Project? ...........................................................................................................2
What is the goal of the course? .............................................................................................................2
Who is the target student? .....................................................................................................................3
   9th and 10th grade ............................................................................................................................3
   11th and 12th grade capstone ............................................................................................................3
   Middle school honors .......................................................................................................................3
How is the course delivered? ..................................................................................................................4
Who is involved in the Big History Project? ..........................................................................................4
   Pilot Schools .........................................................................................................................................4
How is the course organized? ..................................................................................................................5
   Section 1: Formations and early life ....................................................................................................5
   Section 2: Humans ................................................................................................................................5
What planning and instructional resources are available to teachers? ......................................................6
What training and professional development (PD) opportunities are available? .....................................6
Who’s teaching and taking the course? .....................................................................................................6
How is my school supported and what does it cost? .................................................................................7
What’s your approach to assessment and testing? .....................................................................................7
How does the course align to existing standards? ....................................................................................8
How much flexibility is there in the course to adapt it to specific school needs? ......................................8
How can the course be slotted in a school? .............................................................................................9
How can big history fit with my school’s learning environment? .............................................................9
   English language arts (ELA) focus .......................................................................................................9
   Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) focus .................................................................9
   Project based learning (PBL) focus .....................................................................................................9
How long will the course be supported? ..................................................................................................9
How can I learn more? ............................................................................................................................10
**What is big history?**
Big history weaves evidence and insights from many scientific and historical disciplines across 13.7 billion years into a single, cohesive story. The course highlights common themes and patterns that can help us better understand people, civilizations, and the world we live in. The concept arose from a desire to go beyond specialized and self-contained fields of study to grasp history as a whole. Big history explores how we are connected to everything around us. It provides a foundation for thinking about the future and the changes that are reshaping our world. For an overview of big history, see David Christian’s TED Talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history.html)

**What is the Big History Project?**
The Big History Project LLC (BHP) is an organization focused on bringing big history to life for high school students. BHP works with a wide range of experts and partners, including software designers, educators, and institutions like the University of Michigan. The project team develops the course working closely with pilot schools to iterate and refine the curriculum. We engineer content and delivery to serve a wide range of student needs and learning styles. BHP is sponsored by Bill Gates, separately from his work with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

**What is the goal of the course?**
By sharing “the big picture” and challenging students to explore the relationship between key events over time, big history ultimately helps young people develop key critical thinking skills and the ability to better synthesize and apply complex information. These are skills vital not only to more advanced, discipline-specific work in the sciences and humanities, but also to help students understand and evaluate individual and collective impact – and potential. The course also has the following objectives:

- **Foster a greater love of learning.** By presenting information and content in an intuitive, accessible way that invites exploration and challenges students to think critically about core course themes and topics, big history will make it more fun and engaging to learn.

- **Increase student performance and achievement.** By providing a foundation that helps students understand the relationship between discrete disciplines, big history will better prepare them for more advanced study.

- **Deliver on the promise of online learning:** By helping teachers and student’s access world class content and curriculum, online through cutting edge software, we will help deliver improved educational outcomes at scale.

- **Achieve course learning outcomes:** By aligning to a foundation of content-specific learning outcomes at the course and unit levels, big history cultivates the capacity to apply key course
concepts, ideas, and claims, and the use of multiple approaches to knowledge, disciplines, and multiple core literacies.

Who is the target student?

9th and 10th grade

Big history is designed as a social studies / history course targeting 9th or 10th grade. Our core deployment incorporates an even balance of student-led and teacher-driven instruction, delivering ten units over one school year.

11th and 12th grade capstone

The course can also be offered as a capstone deployment for 11th or 12th grade, as a way for teachers and schools to coalesce and synthesize previous discipline-specific work.

BHP becomes a great platform for senior tutoring and guest-teaching, to develop and implement capstone thesis projects, and to partner with colleges and universities.

- Big History can provide the framework for graduating seniors to prepare and teach mini-lessons to lower-level science and history classes, to tutor younger students in the community, and to offer guidance and mentorship on advanced student-skills such as proper study habits, note-taking, conducting research projects, writing papers, and other upper-level strategies and techniques.

- In a Big History senior thesis project, students adapt BHP’s culminating project to identify and research a current local, national, or global issue, applying the concepts and methods of Big History. Once they have a thorough understanding of the issue’s ‘big’ history, students develop a proposal that addresses the issue and implements the resolution.

- Big History can uniquely pave the way for partnerships with universities and colleges. Its rigorous and engaging content resonates across multiple academic levels and creates an opportunity for students and instructors of all ages to connect and collaborate.

Middle school honors

Additionally, some of our pilot schools have modified and scaffolded the curriculum, offering it as an honors middle school course.

Capitalize on the formative years of adolescent learners – teachers and students collaboratively work through core content and skills, develop reading and study strategies, and build a foundation of integrated learning for years to come.
Public learners

While the BHP curriculum targets educators and students, we are also launching a public big history course in October 2013. This is a fun way to get the public involved and will be a great resource for parents who want to follow along with their students!

Ask the big questions, explore the answers, and earn credit as you progress through the eight thresholds to become a certified big historian. Sign up for the course and catch our new mini-series on History Channel’s H2 in October 2013.

How is the course delivered?

All of the content is available online. A completely web-based model ensures the content is up-to-date, relieves schools of the need for costly textbooks, and also helps teachers engage students by providing approachable, media-rich materials that can be used in different ways.

Pilot participants and anyone who requests a username and password is able to access the course. Students and teachers are issued a personal login to gain access to a specialized site that houses all courseware and content. It is up to each individual teacher to determine optimal approach to using the site. For example, in-class time may focus on group projects or discussion, with students absorbing online content for homework, or the site may be used as a core element of the in-class experience.

Who is involved in the Big History Project?

We have assembled some of the best and brightest educators including:

Pilot Schools: No one knows what works better than teachers – accordingly, the entire course has been developed working together with our pilot school teachers and administrators. All aspects of the course – from the core curriculum and content to the assessment strategy have been co-authored with our pilot school partners.

- Over 75 pilot schools throughout the United States, representing a broad range of demographics and educational environments.
- More than 150 pilot teachers offering their input and expertise based on direct, in-class experience teaching the course.

David Christian: Professor of History at Macquarie University, Sydney. David is the “father” of big history – having built out a college level course that is widely taught. David oversees the strategy for the course and leads the main lectures.

Bob Bain: Associate Professor of History and Education at the University of Michigan. Bob oversees all work related to course design and delivery with a specific emphasis on the assessment plan and alignment to standards.
Key Academic Partners: we have a great list of guest lecturers that bring the ideas of big history to life and provide students unique glimpses into different fields.

- Walter Alvarez
- Cynthia Stokes Brown
- Sal Khan
- Janna Levin
- Craig Benjamin
- Skip Gates

Bill Gates: businessman and philanthropist. Bill is providing program support to jumpstart the Big History Project. We expect support to continue for the next 2-3 years at which time big history will be freely and publically available.

How is the course organized?
Big history is broken down into 2 sections and a total of 10 units spanning 13.7 billion years. Within each unit there are between 20 - 30 specific content modules covering specific issues, topics, projects and assessments.

Section 1: Formations and early life
Theories and evidence of origins of the Universe, planet formation, elements, and life.

Unit 1: What is big history?
Unit 2: The Big Bang?
Unit 3: Stars & Elements
Unit 4: Our Solar System & Earth
Unit 5: Life

Section 2: Humans
The development of humans, civilizations, and key milestones in our progress.

Unit 6: Early Humans
Unit 7: Agriculture & Civilization
Unit 8: Expansion and Interconnection
Unit 9: Acceleration
Unit 10: The Future
Throughout the course we invite students to explore, question, and ultimately develop their own understanding of the content. This approach, which can work equally well for individuals and groups, is vital to helping students develop the skills and tools to become well-rounded, independent, critical thinkers.

What planning and instructional resources are available to teachers?
BHP offers teachers a wide variety of resources and support for course planning, including:

- Over 50 lesson plans spanning the entire course, ready for off-the-shelf deployment
- Inline teaching guidance from experts and veteran teachers for all content and assets
- Teaching guides for each unit and supplementary PowerPoint decks
- Online collaboration portal to share lessons, activities, and instructional strategies with an international community of big history teachers

BHP provides over 300 instructional assets, including:

- Project-based learning (PBL)* activities such as Unit 5: Invent a Species, and Unit 7: How Many People Could the Earth Support Now and 100 Years From Now?
- Investigations – inquiry-based activities that help frame some of the big issues tackled in each unit, designed to cultivate critical ELA, research, and persuasive writing skills.
- Engaging videos, complex texts, animations, comic books, infographics, PBL, interactive classroom activities and more, accommodating a variety of learning and instructional styles.

* Project based learning (PBL) is a method of instruction that has students take part in an extended inquiry around a complex question, problem, or challenge. For more information on the PBL method, please see the Buck Institute for Education (BIE) website at http://www.bie.org/.

What training and professional development (PD) opportunities are available?
Regional cluster meetings occur regularly to provide schools and educators face-to-face professional development, implementation guidance, and direct assistance. BHP also offers Monthly webinars to facilitate additional PD and collaboration opportunities.

Who’s teaching and taking the course?
A broad range of teachers and schools are implementing big history throughout the United States and internationally. Many schools are part of our pilot program, helping to author, iterate, and refine the
course. We also have a large number of schools in our unmanaged program. Unmanaged schools are those who have chosen to use our content and resources, but are not part of the pilot. As we scale, we plan to grow the unmanaged program and make big history seamlessly available to any and every one.

Starting in October 2013, there will be a public version of big history available to any and every one. The course targets six hours of content and is a great way for public learners to explore the big history story.

How is my school supported and what does it cost?
Our goal is to ensure that big history is taught effectively with no cost to schools. We provide, free of charge:

- All content and courseware
- Free PD/teacher training program
- Access to core project team for support, assistance and feedback
- A teacher and school subsidy to cover any direct expense and provide support for teachers

Most importantly, a spirit of partnership imbues everything we do. Our singular goal is to get big history in the hands of educators and students, we promise to listen and collaborate accordingly.

In return, we expect schools to collaborate and communicate with us to improve the program. Specifically, this means: incorporating BHP courseware, content and assessments into the lesson plan, participating in professional development activities, and regularly updating the project team about what is happening in the classroom.

What’s your approach to assessment and testing?
In an effort to improve the educational experiences of students, while also providing teachers, students, parents and administrators needed information to assist learning, BHP implements three different types of assessments at six different times throughout the course.

1. **Concept assessments**: A mix of identifications, short answers, and released items from national and state tests in World History, Geography, Biology, Chemistry, and Earth Science, these are designed to gauge student understand and use of the core concepts.

2. **Text-based assessments**: Similar to the “Document-Based Question” (DBQ) developed by College Board, these assess student progress in developing facility to read scientific and historical material, and to create narratives, explanations, and arguments in a range of genres and formats. In addition to being rigorous assessments that capture student understanding of
course material, text-based assessments reflect BHP’s strong commitment to the Common Core State Standards.

3. **Little Big History (LBH):** A problem-based investigation: In the LBH task, students conduct a historical investigation that ranges across time before and after human history, and that employs at least one other approach to knowledge, such as cosmology, chemistry, biology or paleontology. To complete this sustained research project, students conduct a targeted investigation and present their work in a new medium (electronic, dramatic, and visual) to an audience of classmates, parents, or other schools.

This three-pronged assessment approach offers an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding and comprehension of key big history concepts, while also providing longitudinal growth data for teachers, parents, and administrators.

BHP also implements a series of student and teacher logs and surveys to collect feedback on course content and delivery. This feedback is a critical piece to help drive course iteration and refinement, and our strategy for overall improvement.

**How does the course align to existing standards?**
There is strong alignment between the Big History course and the Common Core State Standards, and we will continue to purposefully engineer our content and assessment strategy to support the following specific standards:

- Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies
- Reading Standards for Literacy in Science and Technical Subjects
- Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects
- Speaking and Listening Standards for Grades 9-10

BHP is also aligned with the National World History Standards, and moving forward we will be exploring opportunities to complement other local, state and network-specific standards to deepen our relationship to partner schools.

**How much flexibility is there in the course to adapt it to specific school needs?**
Provided that partner schools participate in the core assessment strategy and make use of the required content, we are open to exploring alternative delivery models and modes. Teachers can incorporate new content to build upon the core theme of big history to make it more relevant to history, science, biology or other disciplines. We are willing to invest in and co-develop those models provided there is an opportunity to deliver them at scale.
How can the course be slotted in a school?
While big history is a true history course, it weaves together concepts and themes drawn from chemistry, physics, and biology. It does so with a goal of helping students understand a historical narrative and ultimately human civilization’s past, present and future.

Schools have full flexibility relative to how they slot the course, provided it is credit bearing. It works best as a full year course as the full content set spans more than 150 hours of material, but based on a school’s specific goals and objectives it can be taught as an immersive semester or summer course as well.

There is a wide range of optional content available for teachers to use that goes deeper on key themes and topics to fill out a full year course. The Big History Project team will work with each pilot school specifically to tailor and customize the slotting and course flow for each specific need.

How can big history fit with my school’s learning environment?
Big history can be tailored in a variety of ways to fit the contours of your school’s identity and mission. While each school will have a unique experience, BHP can flexibly adapt to most school’s orientation and there are a number of advantages that can be capitalized on to maximize the curriculum for your student populations and learning environments.

English language arts (ELA) focus
A diverse range of complex text and literature is built into the foundation of BHP — making it a valuable tool for teachers and schools focused on integrating English Language Arts with history, social studies, and the sciences.

Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) focus
Rigorous yet accessible content covering basic chemistry, physics, biology, and data-literacy and analysis make BHP a great fit for schools with a STEM focus.

Project based learning (PBL) focus
PBL embedded in BHP allows students to dive deeply and creatively for solutions to driving questions related to complex interdisciplinary issues. Combining PBL and BHP creates meaningful student-driven learning experiences. We offer three, ready-to-deploy PBL activities.

How long will the course be supported?
We aim to iterate and refine the course over the next 2 years, at which time we expect to turn over all IP and content to a non-profit institution or partner to continue the course. The course will always be free and easily available to schools.
How can I lean more?

- General info: http://www.bighistoryproject.com
- Questions: info@bighistoryproject.com
- Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/bighistoryproject