

The Evolution of a Big Idea: Why Don't We Know Anything About Africa?

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This article is about my experiences as a ninth grade history teacher trying to implement a “big idea” unit on ancient African history. My experiences as a first year teacher and also my experience in seeing this unit develop over three years are chronicled. I conclude that implementing a big idea strategy of instruction is possible in a “real” classroom, that this implementation is more of a journey than a destination, and that big ideas do help students to learn.

I didn't start out as a teacher. In fact, after college I pursued a career in business for about seven years. While financially rewarding, I found business to be unsatisfying and so I looked for a career that had rewards beyond money alone. I come from a family of teachers and I decided that maybe my calling was in the field. The whole point of my change in careers was to seek something more than money.

When I thought about teaching, I was hoping to do a couple of things. The first was to help the students who I taught to be skeptical consumers of information; to question what they hear and are told and to seek answers for themselves. I felt that in today's world of limitless information and ubiquitous media that critical or skeptical thinking is an important skill to teach if we are to create responsible citizens. The second thing was to help students become more tolerant and to realize that there is a diverse and interesting world around them filled with all kinds of people. I was hoping to encourage students to accept and embrace the differences amongst people. In an increasingly global world, I felt that it was important for students to be better world citizens.

Of course these goals are easier said than done. And when I started teaching, I looked at the goals I had and what I was doing and they didn't seem to match. Especially in my first year, I felt trapped in the curriculum and nervous about the test my students would take at the end of their sophomore year. I guess on some level I hoped that if I could just get through the stuff for my course this year and finish graduate school, then I would be able to teach the way I wanted to teach “later.”

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I think that my experience as a first and second year teacher was pretty typical. I was teaching courses for the first time, trying to finish my masters degree, coaching, paying a mortgage, and bringing home my first and then second child, all while trying to teach kids and get tenured. Needless to say, I felt the pinch.

In graduate school I was exposed to a number of theories on how to be a better teacher and how to make powerful learning happen for students. I read Wiggins (1998) and Grant (2003), Barton and Levstik (2004). I learned about big ideas, inquiry based learning, differentiated instruction, and teaching for participatory democracy. The subtext of all of these courses and all of these texts was that teachers were not doing these things, students were worse off because of it, and truly exceptional teachers who cared about their students would invest the time to teach in these new and improved ways.

But, what about me? I wanted to be an exceptional teacher. I cared. I worked hard. Yet I wasn't doing this stuff: I wasn't teaching with big ideas, I wasn't differentiating instruction, and I wasn't teaching students to be prepared to be citizens in our participatory democracy. In short, I really wasn't meeting the goals that I had set for myself as a teacher. What more could I do? How did people find the time to do all this stuff? Were the "exceptional teachers" just people with no lives who spent their mornings and evenings looking for primary sources, coming up with great plans, and knowing the personal details and learning needs of every single kid? My answer to all of these questions was simple: Yes this stuff sounds great, and I *will* do it. Just not now.

What follows is a description of how I came to see that ambitious teaching, specifically teaching with big ideas, really is doable as long as you look at it as a continual process. The answer to my question of when would I have time to come up with this stuff, is that I didn't need to come up with it all at once. By looking at the evolution of a unit that I teach about Africa, I describe how one unit and one simple idea can provide a path to teaching with big ideas.

School Background and "Teaching to the Test"

I teach in one of the most affluent and successful school districts in Western New York. The high school and the school district generally are consistently ranked in the top three in area rankings. The school has also received the Blue Ribbon National School of Excellence

distinction. My school offers 20 Advanced Placement classes, the school average on SATs is 1100, and 90% of the students go on to post-secondary education.

In other words, my school is a great place to teach. The students generally come from families where education is valued, the community is supportive of a wide variety of school activities, and the administration provides a climate that is safe and dedicated to high standards. However, these high standards come with clear pressure from the community and school board on the administration, teachers, and students of the district to maintain our top ranking.

As for the pressure placed on teachers to get the students to do well on their state tests, the story of my new teacher orientation should suffice. At this meeting the principal announced his position with regards to the Regent's tests: "Just so there is no confusion about whether or not you should be teaching to the tests, let me be clear . . . teach to the test . . . it is how you will be evaluated."

I understand at this point that it may seem like I am whining with regards to the pressure that we face in my school district. But, different schools present different challenges to teachers. I am aware that in many school districts the main concern is just to get students to *pass* the tests. In our school and community, it is *assumed* that we will get all the kids to pass the tests, that is, to achieve a score of 65 or above. So for us, the goal is to get as many students as possible to achieve a score of 85 or above. The mark of 85 and above is considered mastery level in New York and is especially coveted because, across the state and especially in our area, school rankings seem to be an obsession of administrators, board members, and tax-payers, not to mention the media. And what generally differentiates the top schools is students' performance at the mastery level. So the pressure isn't for achieving passing scores, it is for excelling.

To this end, it is made clear to us from the beginning that tenure decisions are made almost exclusively on the 85 or above criteria. Every year we begin with a meeting with the principal where he repeatedly cites this number as a goal. And during every in-service day, the 85 or above goal is listed as one of the objectives. Most, if not all, of the untenured teachers in my school fear the state tests and obsess over content. As a result, my sense is that the vast majority of decisions made by teachers in their first few years involve covering curriculum rather than teaching meaningful lessons.

And yet the pressure continues even once one has earned tenure. In a meeting about a new push in our school to get more kids to the 85 or above benchmark, a colleague of mine who

has been teaching over 15 years said, “I used to spend way more time on class projects and discussion lessons, but now feel like I have to constantly push content just to get it all in.” Further, he said that, because of the additional pressure being placed on teachers with regards to 85 or above that, “this is the first year where teaching has felt like a job.”

Basically the culture here is to teach to the test, most, if not all, teachers comply. Although many studies that we read in graduate school say that if one teaches with big ideas and in other ambitious ways, student achievement will improve, most teachers just do not feel like there is enough time to teach in these innovative ways and cover everything that needs to be covered. Teachers can teach however they want, but the pressure here is towards coverage and away from more ambitious ways of teaching.

My Introduction to Teaching About Africa

My first year at Clarence High, I taught senior-year Government and Economics courses, which, although state-mandated, have no state tests associated with them. In many ways, these were like teaching elective courses: Since there were no test results at the end of year on which I would be evaluated, I felt that there was time to explore fewer topics and in greater depth. Also I felt more comfortable experimenting with innovative lessons and units without having to worry so much about coverage.

The next year I taught 9th grade Global History and Geography for the first time. In addition to taking on a new preparation, I was in the middle of coaching my first season of volleyball, had a one-year old at home, and was taking a masters-level class. In addition, I was still untenured and I felt strongly that I was to be evaluated heavily on my students’ achievement on our common assessment.ⁱ In other words, I felt as though I didn’t have enough time to think about the best ways to teach everything that I was supposed to teach. I was in survival mode.

When I reached the point in the curriculum where I was to teach about early Africa, I felt at a loss. In fact, other than the slave trade, I really didn’t know where to start. I was a US history major in college and really had not thought much about Africa since maybe my own ninth-grade class. Without much content background of my own, I searched for help. I first looked at the New York state curriculum and saw that there was very little in there about Africa. In a curriculum of 40 single-spaced pages, ancient African civilizationsⁱⁱ were reduced to this list:

Rise and fall of African civilizations: Ghana, Mali, Axum, and Songhai empires

1. Human and physical geography
2. Organization structure
3. Contributions
4. Roles in global trade routes
5. Spread and impact of Islam--Mansa Musa
6. Timbuktu and African trade routes

Finding this list not very instructive I went through some past New York state Regents Global History exams. This exam is given three times a year and all the teachers in New York know that, in spite of what the curriculum writers might say, the questions on the exams have a way of repeating themselves. Aware of this tendency, I thought that the exams would be a good place to start to make sure that I at least covered the information on which the students would be tested. Past exams, however, were not particularly helpful. Basically, I saw three questions: One was about the gold-salt trade, one was about the Bantu migrations, and one was about how there had been civilizations in Africa before the Europeans arrived. I found it interesting that the state made a point to ask a question pointing out that there were civilizations before the Europeans arrived, but made no point of asking about those civilizations. I also thought that it was unfortunate that the area of the world about which my students probably knew the least required me to teach the least about it. I started to feel that it was wrong to send the message to the students that Africa doesn't matter.

Finally, I talked to some teachers about what the kids really needed to know about Africa? The first answer I got was "nothing." As I pressed further, I got "teach something about the Bantu migrations . . . they ask that every year." Then I got what turned out to be a similar response from two other teachers, one of whom said: "Let me put it this way, I am teaching and testing about Africa on Friday." This attitude was confirmed later in the year when I was walking through one of the teacher's classrooms. As he was putting up his overhead of notes about Africa, he said, "I have to apologize about this unit . . . it is a bit like a Hoover vacuum . . . it sucks."

The bottom line is that most of my colleagues viewed Africa as something to be covered for the test. Africa was a few bullet points to be tested with three questions. So why spend more than a day on Africa?

Finally, I talked to another teacher with whom I share a similar philosophy of teaching. He told me that he starts off his unit on Africa by asking the question, “why don’t we know anything about Africa?” Little did I know that this simple question was going to be the beginning of my understanding of what it meant to teach big ideas. The truth is that, although it may seem like I was taking an ambitious route to teaching, I was actually still in survival mode and looking for the easiest route. This teacher had a good idea of what to teach and the materials to go along with it. I happened upon teaching with big ideas because, in this case at least, it appeared to be easier. By that I mean, rather than coming up with my own unit, I had the beginnings of an ambitious big idea unit handed to me.

The Evolution of the Unit

After my colleague asked the question, my response was, “I don’t know . . . why don’t we?” From that point, we discussed how little is required of students throughout high school and beyond and why that is. He brought up issues of slavery, imperialism, and continuing problems of race. I began to see how that fact that we know so little about Africa reveals much about history and our modern views on the world. My friend’s simple question stayed with me as I tried to plan a unit on Africa. In doing so, I discovered two things. The first was that I didn’t know anything about Africa. The second was that this unit, for me, wasn’t just about Africa anymore.

First steps toward a big idea unit. The first year I started the discussion of Africa with the simple question of why we don’t know anything about Africa. Students responded with comments like “because there is nothing there,” “because nobody ever taught us about it,” and “because nothing good ever came out of Africa.” I asked follow-up questions that, I think, revealed much of what I wanted them to learn on their own. Rather than simply asking, “why do you think that is?” or “what proof do you have of that?” I asked questions like “does it tell you anything about how we value Africa by what we don’t know?” and “what does that tell you about how we view Africans today?”

The unit then featured a series teacher-created PowerPoint presentation, a movie, and a Regents-style test. For extra credit, I asked the students to explain why Africa matters. What they wrote sounded very similar to all the points that I had made the first day. They wrote things like “because learning about Africa’s history might affect how we view Africa today,” and “maybe if

people knew that Africa had a history it could help with racism.” Although I was thrilled to read these things, I realized that I was hearing my own voice way too clearly to show any sort of meaningful learning. In other words, I felt that students were repeating what they thought I wanted to hear rather than writing something meaningful that they had learned on their own. Basically, the mistake I made my first year was in *teaching* too much rather than letting the students reach their own conclusions.

As the Africa unit approached during my second year of teaching Global History, I was keen to improve the unit and to help my students see how things like history and race have been constructed throughout time. I started with a KWL chartⁱⁱⁱ to make explicit their knowledge and feelings towards the subject. I thought that it was important for the students to see how little they knew about Africa and to see the underlying prejudices that they had towards Africa past and present. As I suspected, the kids had little or no knowledge of Africa and what they did know centered on things like slavery, war, and disease. Further, they believed the reason for their lack of knowledge was that there was/is nothing of value in Africa. Actual responses of students about what they knew about Africa included responses such as “don’t people all live in huts there,” “aren’t there a lot of wars,” and “nothing.”

With these responses, I felt that there was an opportunity to teach the kids a lesson about more than ancient African civilizations. Unfortunately, I once again interjected too much of what I wanted the kids to learn by the end of the first discussion. Rather than let the students discover knowledge and have personal “aha” moments, I basically beat them over the head with my own beliefs from the beginning: 1) the case of Africa shows where race and power can affect history and how that flawed history can continue to affect modern views of race and power, and 2) history and racism are historically connected and constructed, and 3) to address modern problems, it can be instructive to examine where they came from. Although I think that many of the kids got the point of what I was trying to teach them, a lot of them tuned out as they figured out what they thought I wanted them to know.

Reflections and changes. Later, reflecting on how the unit had gone the first two years, I realized that *I* was the problem. Rather than letting the discussion develop from the student perspective, I ended up asking many leading questions. After I asked the question, “why don’t we know anything about Africa?” many students responded that they hadn’t been taught anything about Africa. I immediately pounced on this and asked “why is that?” They responded

with a lot of the kinds of guesses described above. Rather than writing these ideas down and using them as points of departure, I immediately started refuting their ideas and telling them information from the unit. Finally, I ended up asking a lot of “don’t you think . . . ?” questions which obviously revealed my beliefs.

The bottom line: I realized that since I was taking the time to try to teach the students something meaningful, I didn’t want them to tell me only what they thought I wanted them to think about Africa. I wanted them to actually *think* about Africa and create meaning from the ideas for themselves. I wasn’t trying to cover content for a test, I was trying to get them to think about a larger set issues.

I think that the reason I taught the way I did for those first couple of years was because I wasn’t really sure of what I wanted them to get out of it and I wasn’t always sure where the discussion would go if left to have a life of its own. The real result was that when we came to later discussions and also their final assessments, I could “hear” my voice in their voices and writing. Maybe some students got the point, but I think that most were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. Basically many students echoed the exact words that I gave them in response to my first day question of “why does Africa matter?” They wrote things like “because how view Africa in the past affects how we view Africa, Africans, and African-Americans today” and “if we can understand how racism affects history maybe we can think about how it continues to affect society today.” These were great responses, but they sounded far too much like things I had said earlier in the unit. So, I took these responses less as evidence of learning and more as evidence of repeating information for a grade.

The third time I taught the Global History course I was very conscious not to interject so much of my own voice into the initial and later discussions. I asked similar initial questions, but I allowed students to comment on each others’ ideas. For example, the most common initial response to my question about we don’t know anything about Africa was “because we haven’t been taught anything about Africa.” My response to this was “well, why do you think that is?” In the past, I would have followed my initial open-ended question with others that would have tipped my hand about the “right” answers. For example, I would have asked questions like “what does this tell you about how we value Africa?” or “don’t you think this teaches you that Africa isn’t important.”

This time, I allowed students to explore their own reasoning. Some students guessed that “nothing happened there,” “nothing has been discovered,” “they didn’t write,” they didn’t trade,” and “they aren’t important.” This time, rather than my addressing these reasons directly, we wrote these ideas down in order to see how these hunches might later turn out. Using this list as a foil for the rest of the unit was very effective as students crossed their previous guesses from the list as they uncovered information about the African civilizations. For my part, I guided the discussions with very little comment, let the students research the information they needed, and allowed them the freedom to explore the difficult issues that were raised by this unit. Their conclusions--that there were great civilizations in Africa, that historians have known about them for years, and that there has been an intentional attempt made for 500 years to ignore that history--were completely their own. From these ideas came discussions about the legacy of slavery, imperialism in Africa, and racism at home.

The Unit as It Currently Stands

What follow is a series of snapshots of the lessons that currently comprise my unit.

Day 1: Students complete the “know” and “want to know” sections of a KWL chart.

We do KWL activities from time to time in my class and the students are familiar with them. I instruct students to only think of things that they know about Sub-Saharan Africa. Inevitably the students say they know nothing, or offer only information about after the Europeans arrive (e.g., slavery), or modern negatives (e.g., war, disease). his activity leads into a discussion of “why do you think that we know so little about Africa?” Usually they start with things like “because we haven’t learned about it yet.” I then remind them of how much they knew when they did KWLs on Greece, Rome, China, and Egypt and ask why they knew so much about these civilizations and so little about Africa. When they respond “because we haven’t been taught anything about Africa,” I press them to try to figure out why *that* was. They then come up with many things like “because there isn’t anything there,” “nothing important happened there,” and the like. I interject very little and just jot down their reasons.

We then complete the “W” (or “what I *want* to learn”) part. Here, the students start to have general questions such as “were there any empires there?” and “did anything happen there?” I let these questions go for later discussion.

Day 2: Students read and discuss several primary source documents from travelers who went to various African empires before the age of imperialism.

The two readings that I have found work best are excerpts from *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and *The Book of Roger* by Al-Idrisi. The reason why I find these texts most helpful is that, at this point of the year, we have learned about the golden ages of Greece and of the empires of Islam. Hearing me tell them that there was greatness in Africa is not nearly as convincing to them as hearing voices from two civilizations that they regard as advanced describing that greatness. It is a chance to see that travelers from the most advanced of civilizations of the time were impressed with what they encountered in Africa.

Light bulbs seem to start to go on as they see Greeks describe Africans as highly civilized and prosperous and Muslim traders describe the wealth of Africa. This is the first time that they have learned that “there was something there.” I then show the students a PowerPoint on Kush and Axum including images of the art and architecture of these kingdoms. Typically, they are amazed that such fabulous kingdoms existed before the arrival of Europeans.

Days 3-5: Students create PowerPoint presentations on one of the African empires.

Depending on the size of the group, I tend to let the students choose between Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Benin, Axum, and Zimbabwe. The students work in groups and have library and computer time. The emphasis is on finding images and primary source writings about or from these empires. The guiding question for the students in all groups is “what was in Africa before the Europeans showed up?”

The student inquiries are mostly factual based. Students are tasked with finding things like where the empire was, how they came to power, who their important rulers were, what their main accomplishments were, why they lost power, and with whom they traded. The point here is to encourage them to see the art, architecture, and literature of civilizations that

they previously had no idea existed. In the end, they are asked to list the three most important things that they learned from creating their PowerPoint. Often times the principal thing that they say they learned was that “there was actually something there.”

Days 6-7: Students present and discuss their projects.

Students present PowerPoint presentations of approximately ten slides. All students in each group are expected to present and one large part of the grading involves being able to explain more information than the bullet points on the slides. This usually takes the form of describing the pictures from the slides or the quotes from or about famous Africans. Typically each presentation lasts from 10-20 minutes.

At the end, students are asked to answer the following question: “Which is the greatest empire and why?” I don’t give them criteria to determine what it means to be a great civilization, I just pose the question. We then spend time discussing their answers and their criteria. Students seem to forget that “there isn’t anything in Africa.” The idea is that, if they are debating which civilization is the greatest, then their thinking is well beyond “was there anything there?”

I am also interested to see what criteria the students use for defining what a great civilization is. I am hoping here to show them how culturally defined their criteria are. In other words, they tend to pick the civilizations with the biggest buildings and the most trade. By their own definitions, I hope to show them how their definitions would exclude many of the civilizations outside of Europe and Europe’s sphere of influence.

Finally, I use the question about a greatest African civilization to set up the movie and thesis for the next two days by getting the kids into a whole new level of discussion about Africa.

Day 8-9: Students view Time-Life Lost Civilizations series movie, *Africa: A History Denied*. Completion of the L part of the KWL chart.

The thesis of this video is that there has been a deliberate attempt by Western and Muslim societies to deny Africa its history in order to accommodate their imperialist agendas.

After the movie, we discuss again the question of why we know so little about African history. Usually we end up touching on modern preconceived notions, racism, and other important topics.

Then, students fill in the “L” (or “what I learned”) part of the KWL chart. Responses vary from the general (“I learned that there was something in Africa”) to the more specific and analytical (“I learned that because of things like imperialism and racism Africa has been denied a history”). I also receive responses such as “nothing” and “there were civilizations in Africa, but none of them were that great.”

Day 10: Essay test

The final assessment of this unit is an essay where students are asked to explain why they think that it is important to learn about African history. We conclude by discussing their answers.

What About the Kids? What Do I Think that They Got Out of the Big Idea?

Although I can never be certain exactly what the kids have learned from the unit, I have taken their concluding answers to “why we don’t know anything about Africa” and “why Africa matters” as proof of some change. Whereas in the beginning of the unit they were inclined to say things like “there was nothing there” and “Africa doesn’t matter,” by the end these views typically have changed. Many students will say that “Europeans have tried to hide the history” or “white people don’t want to believe that Africans could have been so advanced.” Finally, when a student writes something like “I feel that learning about Africa is important because it might change how we view people of color today,” I feel like I have achieved something. In past years, I may have felt that students were merely repeating something that they had heard me say earlier in the unit, this year I felt as though these ideas were their own responses and showed evidence of learning.

I am sure that some of these responses sound much like the ones offered when I was sure that the students were just telling me things that had heard me say or things that they thought that I wanted to hear. However, I feel more confident that these are their own responses and those these responses demonstrate real learning because I am careful not to say any of the things that I hope they learn throughout the lesson. The biggest thing that I hope they get is a feeling of “hey,

it is weird that we don't know anything about Africa" and "there are very important reasons for it."

When we conclude our discussion of the big question of "why don't we know anything about Africa?" we refer back to the list that we came up with at the beginning of the unit. We cross off things like "because there was nothing there" and "because historians don't know anything about it." Typically we end up crossing off all of the possibilities that we came up with. We are left then with the thesis from the movie, that there has been a deliberate attempt to deprive Africa of its history. The evidence for this assertion comes in the form of the knowledge that we have uncovered about what we as historians actually do know about Africa. When I ask questions about their thinking here, they will say things like "well, if we know all this stuff about Africa and don't teach it, it just seems obvious that people are trying to ignore it or hide it for some reason."

That said, I am sure that not all the students are getting it. In fact, I do admit that there are definitely those who don't or won't get it. Last year I had at least two students who, in response to the question, "why does Africa matter?" simply wrote, "It doesn't."

One encouraging thing that I have witnessed is that often students who are not usually successful on traditional assessments become the ones who seem to take the lead in many of the discussions in this unit and often come up with the most compelling answers at the end. And while many of them continue to struggle with the traditional assessments that we must give in preparation for the mandated tests, I feel that the experience of success in these types of units, as well as the larger lessons that they are hopefully learning, are meaningful to them.

What I Learned About Big Idea Teaching

I have learned a couple of things through this process and through reflecting on the process. The first thing is that my graduate school professors were correct. I found that when I taught with big ideas, when I allowed students to search for answers, and when I led a class without "leading" the class, students were more engaged, more willing to take on bigger concepts, and more able to look at issues bigger than information for a test. Hopefully this experience will help them to be more skeptical of and to look differently at the world around them. In other words, for those of us in teaching for more than test results, using big ideas can help us actually teach the kids something.

The second thing that I have learned from this process is that there is time to implement these ideas. As I said above, I didn't plan on teaching this unit as a big idea unit. However, as time passed, I realized that I was teaching a big idea unit and that there was time to add, subtract, and improve what I was doing. Most of us in teaching will be doing this for 30 years or more. There may not be time to plan the best big idea unit about Africa for next week, but once I started on the path I realized that I could teach some form of a big idea unit about Africa this year, and plan for a better big idea unit next year. The point here is to start somewhere. Moreover, having seen the results of this type of teaching, I am exploring additional big idea units around the following questions: "What does it mean to be barbaric?" for a unit on the Mongols; "Are Native Americans civilized?" for a unit on Exploration and Encounter; and "Is the process for making laws in our country broken?" for a unit on Congress.

Moreover, my Africa unit is still not "finished." At this point, I am hoping to teach this unit in similar fashion in future years. However, I still feel that there is room for improvement. An ambitious direction to take this unit a step further might be to start with the questions: "What is racism? Where does it come from?" My thought is to start off with these questions even before the students construct their answers to the KWL. I am not sure what will come of this one change, but I am interested to see the results. The point here is that modifying units like this is a never-ending process with many different possibilities.

Last, I have learned that implementing ideas from graduate school such as the big idea is a process. I know of no teacher who has implemented all of these ideas for all of his/her units. But what I do hear from like-minded colleagues is that they are struggling every year to improve on what they did the year before. With this unit, I jotted down notes from year to year so that when Africa was coming up, I could improve upon and expand what I did the year before. This idea that units evolve, that is, that my teaching evolves, is what I most learned from all of this process.

References

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- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Notes

ⁱ The ninth grade common assessment is not a state exam, but is one that my colleagues and I develop from past Regents questions.

ⁱⁱ There are later references in the curriculum to Africa. However, this list represents the only part of the curriculum that deals with Africa before the era of European imperialism.

ⁱⁱⁱ A KWL chart is a graphic organizer on which students track what they know (K), what they want to know (W), and what they have learned (L). Students discuss and answer the first two sections as the unit begins and the third at the end.