

Teaching History from a Non-U.S. Perspective in an American Classroom

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This article examines the reflections of a high school world history teacher in his first year of teaching in an urban school just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. It details his experience as he tries to integrate his educational background and his experience of living abroad with the goals and objectives of teaching history. The primary method used for this integration was an investigation into the influence of picture selection within high school history textbooks. Results indicated pictures selected by different textbooks, even with used with the same narrative, did influence high school students' perceptions of historical events.

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Introduction

In Boston, they ask How much does he know? In New York, How much is he worth? In Philadelphia, Who were his parents? And when an alien observer turns the telescope upon us-advertisedly in our own special interest- a natural apprehension moves us to ask, What is the diameter of his reflector.

-What Paul Boutget Thinks of Us (1895)

The idea that our culture shapes the way questions are asked is not new. In fact, the idea of ethnocentrism has been around for a long time, but not until recently has it become a real concept to me. Way back in 1982 when I was in sixth grade, I completed a project on Japan and from then the seed was planted. In 1997 after completing a degree in history I found myself on an airplane heading to Japan. During the next three years in Osaka, while I taught English as a second language, I became very interested in the way history was taught. Having a degree in history I felt I had a good understanding of the events of the second world war, but I was soon surprised. In numerous conversations with Japanese friends both young and old I was questioned about points of view I had never heard before. "What do you think about the A-B-C-D line?" What was the A-B-C-D line? What had I missed? The lesson that followed opened my eyes to a new viewpoint that I

had not considered before. It is commonly taught in schools that the United States entered the war with the 'sneak attack' on Pearl Harbor but looking at the situation from a different viewpoint is quite interesting. Japan was the first country in Asia to industrialize and industrialization meant the need for natural resources. Looking at the map, it is easy to see how Japan, dependent on importing natural resources, saw its position in the late 1930's. The Americans were in the Philippines and Midway. The British were in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Burma, India, and Singapore. The Dutch were in the Dutch East Indies. When you add in the Chinese the A-B-C-D line is complete with three of the four powers being non-Asian and all controlling resources and hostile to Japan. The Americans had cut off exports to Japan and even had volunteer pilots fighting along side an American supplied China against the Japanese. Was the choice for Japan either to try and take natural resources or sit back and wait for its economy to collapse? I don't know the true answer, but it is not the answer that I find most important. We can study something in history and feel that we understand the subject but how helpful is that in the ever shrinking global community when it really shows just one side. I can suggest to a student that they should be familiar with U.S.-Japanese relations given the idea that they could work in a company with contacts with Japan, but is it helpful if what I teach leads then to assume the other side views things as we do? Maybe this experience

was limited to miscommunication due to language or perhaps a single case, but I soon discovered otherwise. I experienced this type of event not only with my Japanese friends but also with my friends from Canada, England, New Zealand, and Australia. We spoke English and were on the same side during the second world war, but still our interpretations of events were different. I always considered the Pacific part of the war an American experience in some ways, but soon learned, for example, of the large component of British ships in the battle for Okinawa. I had expected to find at least consensus among my fellow ex-patriots. While they experienced some of the same conversations in Japan as I had I was again surprised. Why was I so surprised by these different points of view? I had a degree in history, served in the military, traveled to Canada, Mexico, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, India, and Japan, but still I reinforced the view of Americans as being ethnocentric. A view which I heard repeated about Americans often. What could I do about this? What went wrong in my education? Was I the problem? How could I avoid this in the future? These are the questions I asked myself when I started my prepracticum and later my full practicum as well at a high school south of Boston.

The School

The context in which I will place these questions is a small city located just south of Boston. House High School is one of two public high schools located in Quincy, Massachusetts. The city of Quincy has a long history as a community which dates back to 1625 and the school has a long tradition as well which can be seen by the age of the school building itself. Comments are often heard about the extreme heat or extreme cold of some rooms depending on the whim of the plumbing. A current issue in the community is the placement of the site to build a new building. In general, the building in the very least does cause some distractions to both students and teachers. Hopefully, this will be corrected once a new site is decided and the new school building is completed. The community outside of the school is also very complex. While the population of the town according to 1988 data is 84,985 with a median household income of \$35,858, 20% of the students at this high school come from families living below the poverty line. From the perspective of a student-teacher I often see students come to class unprepared due to a lack of supplies such as pencils or pens. Is this due to poverty or are there other reasons? I am curious if my counterparts in more affluent areas

have the same type of problem? From comments made by teachers it seems there is very little contact between teachers and parents due to a variety of reasons including language differences. My cooperating teacher once had a very negative reaction from parent when she wanted to move a student from standard level to honors level class. The parent responded that her child was not smart enough to go to the higher level class. Generally House High School is seen as that "other" high school in Quincy while the other school is often featured in the local newspaper. This 'wrong side of the track' image is well known by parents, faculty and students, but the strengths of the school are known as well. The students are a source of one of these strengths. The student body is quite difficult to describe with just a few words. It is diverse with 19% of the students represent 39 different languages. While many students bring in problems from home and there is a sense of this being a school within a city, there is still a sense of mutual respect or community. During my time here from last October, I have never seen a serious discipline problem or disturbance between students. I can not say there are no problems but the school makes an very active effort. There is a security staff on duty at all times and a mediation center available.

The school has a large ESL program and a large technical center. The 'tech' is connected by an overpass but this seems to be the only connection as it often seems to conflict with some of the more traditional subjects for resources and other things. The environment inside the classroom seems to favor a more traditional style of teaching, but there are exceptions. My cooperating teacher, Mrs. D., uses a variety of methods and tools to teach her world history classes. The two classes I am teaching are freshmen courses in World History. The first few months I taught African, Russian, and Chinese history using various methods with help from Mrs.D. Given this environment and my experience in Japan my question began to take shape.

The Question

The question "what happens when history is taught from a non-U.S. Perspective in an American classroom" was born from my experience overseas. It is important to understand the facts surrounding an historical event but it must be equally important not to just accept our view but to try and understand the viewpoints of others. Recently I had two Japanese students who were visiting the United States come in and speak to my class. The students had a fantastic

experience asking questions and learning about each other. A comment made by one student jumps to mind. One of the students from Japan just finished explaining how school in Japan meets on Saturday as well when an American student asked “how does it feel now that you know that it is wrong, I mean that you don’t have to go to school on Saturdays?”.

All people see the world through the lenses of their own society. It takes a good deal of effort to see the world (or ourselves) from the perspectives of another nation or ethnic group. Just as our eyes often play tricks on us, so our cultural assumptions often blind us to the richness of other ways of life, and keep us from examining ourselves objectively. (SPICE, 5)

It was often expressed to me that Americans have the image of being very ethnocentric. Looking at this only in the context of history I decided to attempt to teach a unit of history from a non-U.S. Perspective. I plan to use a variety of sources including Japanese history textbooks to see if the students develop a different perspective of the unit. While the language difference precludes using the text of the book another resource is still available, the pictures. The picture selection in textbooks is very interesting and a comparison with foreign textbooks on the same subject lead to some interesting observations.

We must ask what kind of coverage textbooks provide, beginning with the images they supply. Photographs have been a part of the record of war in the United States since Mathew Brady’s famous images of the Civil War. In Vietnam, television images joined still photos to shape the perception and sensibility of the American people. More than any other war in our history, the Vietnam War was distinguished by a series of images that seared themselves into the public consciousness. I have asked a dozens of adults old enough to have lived during the war to tell me what visual images they remember; the list of images they have supplied shows remarkable overlap. A short list includes these five specific images:

- *A Buddhist monk sitting at a Saigon intersection immolating himself*
- *The little girl running down Highway 1 after a napalm attack*
- *The national police chief executing a man with a pistol shot to the head*
- *The bodies in a ditch after the My Lai massacre*

- *Americans evacuating from a Saigon rooftop by helicopter*

Merely reading these short descriptions prompts most older Americans to remember the images in sharp detail. The emotions that accompanied them come back vividly as well. Of course, since the main American involvement in the war took place from 1965 to 1973, Americans must have been at least thirty in 1993 to have seen these images. Today’s young people have little chance to see or recall these images unless their history books provide them. They don’t. (Loewen, 241)

Further research I did into this question of pictures in textbooks suggests that not only are pictures omitted but that some types of pictures are over represented. According to Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant, who reviewed fourteen different social studies textbooks by nine publishers found some of the following results when looking at pictures by race and gender.

Collectively, the picture representation of people of color is very low compared to that of whites, less than two to one (926 Whites/ 458 people of color). The total number of Black Americans pictured (183) makes them a distant second, and the total number of native Americans pictured (66) makes this group third. Asian Americans have a total of 21 fewer than for White Americans in one book. The total number of Hispanics pictured (49) is less than the number of Whites in four of the books. In fact, White males alone have 49 or more pictures in five books.

Gender

Males have many more pictures than females (855/ 512), and there are many more pictures of White females than females of color (328/182). The majority of the books show women in traditional as well as nontraditional roles, but rarely is a male pictured in a nontraditional role. (Sleeter, 286)

Should I try and count how many groups are represented and in what numbers? I don’t think so, but I should be aware of this. While using the Japanese textbook provides a nonwestern source how else can I teach from a nonwestern perspective? Being a product of western society can I truly teach from a nonwestern perspective? Even if I can teach from a nonwestern perspective how do I know that I am not just giving my own interpretation? I am not sure, but I feel more comfortable having found these

questions. This is an ongoing process where I must continually take a step back from my own practice and question it. It is a long unending road, but I believe it will be a rewarding journey. Now for the first few steps.

Data Sources and Analysis

Now I have the question but what do I do with it? Once I do it how do I judge its effectiveness? Maybe I can answer both questions with my data sources. Units taught in a more 'traditional' method, my journals, lesson plans, surveys, my perceptions, observations of my cooperating teacher and supervisor along with student's work will hopefully provide insight into the finding an answer for my question.

The first unit I taught after taking over two world history classes was a unit on ancient African history. I was excited to take over the class and jump in with both feet but then the realization hit me; what did I know about ancient African history? While I really wanted to teach history with the theme of multiculturalism I was frustrated with the amount of time I had use just to get my own knowledge up to pace. I had limited resources and limited knowledge and considered that this could cause a problem for teachers when they are faced with teaching a unit they may be unfamiliar with. The following was my journal entry:

Most of my time has been spent in preparing my unit on African history. The text book the class is using spends only about ten pages or so on that chapter of history and other resources are scarce. I am concerned about my own knowledge in this area and I am also trying to think of an interesting way to present the material.

Right out of the gate and I hit a speed bump. How can I overcome this in the future? The material I collected will provide a base from which I can build. Mrs.D provided some interested resources and there were others I was able to find. A collaborative effort by teachers to pool resources is one possible answer. The student's response to this first unit was positive but I do not feel this unit came close to my ambition to teach history from other perspectives. I feel as if I 'survived' the unit.

Some of the main sources of data will revolve around the unit on Japanese history that I will teach. The time period running from the Jomon period to

the end of the Tokugawa shogunate which is just a few thousand years in about two weeks. This is the 'big push' where I really hope to bring the students to see the history from the other side. With just two weeks and the MCAS test hanging over my head it is a limited opportunity, but when would a teacher not be limited by time so I must make the best of it. Approaching this lesson I am feeling some pressure.

The unit was divided into sections on perceptions/introduction, geography, Nara period, Heian period, and then the Tokugawa shogunate. I spent a fair amount of time on perceptions. While my goal is to have the students see an event from different perspectives I realize that I may not be able to achieve this goal all the time. I would at least like the students to be aware that there is another side beyond the base facts as we see them. I had the opportunity to have two students from Japan come and speak in my class. One girl was a high school student and the other was a college student. The students prepared questions before the class to allow the guest speakers a chance to prepare their answers and allow me to look over the questions. The class did capture the interests of the students based upon my observation of several students staying and asking questions even after the bell had rung. One very interesting comment came from a student after the guest speakers finished explaining how the school week in Japan runs from Monday to Saturday. Student A asked "How do you feel now that you know that it is wrong or I mean you don't have to go to school on Saturday." Bringing the guest speakers into my class gave the subject life but some students didn't take the next step.

Brainstorming is a method I used to gather the images the students have of Japan so we could discuss them, but before this I presented the students with two surveys. The first is a 1971 Louis Harris on Poll which yielded the following results:

Agree	Disagree	
52%	06%	The Japanese may not agree with us on everything, but we need their friendship in order to maintain peace and stability in the Pacific.
34%	20%	The Japanese have become a really democratic nation since World War Two. It is now a peace loving country and stands on common ground with the US.
30%	21%	The Japanese fell under the control of the military before World War Two. The same thing could happen here in this country some day.

Agree	Disagree	
10%	42%	Oriental, including Japanese, are sly and devious- we should never trust them or rely on them as allies.
19%	30%	Japan, at its current rate of economic growth, will surpass the US in average family income within the next thirty years and will become a superpower.

Before giving this opinion poll I was concerned about it because of question number four. Was I insulting the students with this question? I decided to make a disclaimer before handing out the paper. The students were asked to look at the year of this poll and consider that when thinking about why certain questions were asked. By surprise 10% of the students agreed with the question. If this was given to a different generation I would expect a different result for question number four, but why did 10% agree? Why did only 52% answer the question? Did they agree because they assumed I would expect them to disagree with the question? I am worried that it could be more. During my prepracticum I observed a lesson by a teacher on the Vietnam War. While discussing some causes of the war one white male student made racist remarks against Asians. There were several Asian students in the room at the time. The teacher quickly passed over the comments and moved on. After the class I discussed what happened with the teacher and he explained that the student in question was extreme and that the other students in the room understand that and in general they ignore him. Looking back at my original goal I had considered taking the students from a standpoint of neutrality in their viewpoints to one of considering alternate viewpoints. I had not considered that there may be stiff resistance to this attempt. I am with these students on average fifty minutes a day each week. Is that enough time to compete with fourteen years of learned stereotypes? Do I put more effort into trying to reach every student or do I accept that I can't reach every student and move on? How do I allocate the limited resource of time?

A second survey I conducted concentrated more on not just the students agreeing or disagreeing with questions but actually using their own words. I conducted this survey twice, once in the beginning of the unit and again later in the unit. The first few questions asked the students to provide three adjectives to describe the Japanese, what they would expect to see in Japan, and what they think of when

they think of Japanese people. In the initial survey the most common answer for the question of what do you think of when you think about Japanese people was food. This changed in the second survey to Buddhism and Shintoism. This happens to be the last lesson we did in class before they retook the survey. Would it have been better to conduct the survey again after we had started an entirely new unit? Are the students just focusing on the lesson at hand? Do I need more continuity from lesson to lesson? I felt I was continuing a theme of looking at Japanese history from the Japanese side but maybe I did not effectively communicate this to the students. What would you expect to see? The most common answer was simply 'people'. The second survey showed a wider variety including, mountains, crowded population, shrines, and temples. While I am not sure this is helping them to see the other side it does reflect on my teaching practice. The students really gave me what I had stressed during my lessons. I could see our discussions in their answers. Revisiting the idea that I could be the only source of Japanese history for some of the students and seeing how much my lesson influenced their answers is disturbing. While I am happy they captured some of the themes in my lesson I worry that I may give them my beliefs instead of helping them find their own. The influence and responsibility of teacher is incredible. Concerning the question on stating three adjectives it was interesting that several students used the term 'sneaky'. Is this a reaction to the question from the Louis Harris Poll? Did I discuss the question and mention the wording? I am not sure but it is interesting how some students seem to pick up certain things when I may not even notice it. The next section on the survey asked the students to rate several sources as strong, moderate, or weak influences on their perceptions of Japan. In the initial survey television and home were most often ranked as strong or moderate influences. In the second survey school was overall ranked as the strongest influence. This was to be expected. If the student had limited exposure to Japan then a week of lessons would fill the void. The next section had the most interesting result. The final question asked the students to rate how strongly they feel their perceptions are correct from completely sure, moderately sure, not so sure, and completely unsure. In the initial survey most students stated they felt their perceptions were completely to moderately sure they were correct. In the second survey, there was a large shift with a few students stating moderately sure, and more students responding not so sure. It could be seen as the students are now more confused than before but I interpret the data differently. Had the

students shifted from assuming that what they study in school is the entire story of an event to one of questioning? Are they questioning their perceptions. I want to believe this is the case. I hope this is the case, but I am not sure. It is interesting and exciting. Something did happen! Let's take a look at the events between the first survey and the second.

The original question I proposed was what happens when history is taught from a nonwestern perspective in an American classroom. But how do I do it? I can't bring the students to Japan and place them in a Japanese classroom so I must bring as much of that classroom to them as possible. I do not want to study the differences in teaching styles between Japan and the United States but I want to look more at resources. Picture selection is quite interesting so I used a Japanese high school history textbook and translated a few key words. The students were given a copy, broken into groups and asked to look at the various pictures in the text. As a group they developed theories on the importance of each picture and then, as a class, we discussed them. In the three different classes I tried this activity, the students did very well. It provided them a different viewpoint and made them consider what another group saw as important.

Another activity used during the unit was the viewing of scenes from an old Japanese horror film. The name of the film is *The Wrath of Daimajin*. It takes place in feudal Japan and tells the story two rival daimyos and the eventual defeat of one. After the defeat, the victorious daimyo destroys a shinto shrine dedicated to the god protecting the defeated daimyo. The god comes back for revenge. While the film is a horror story, it was made in Japan and provides examples of feudal society as seen by that country. It also includes references to the shinto religion which was covered in class. The students enjoyed the movie which doesn't say that much as generally high school students, in my experience, enjoy movies. This is, however, a nonwestern source and another piece of the picture.

In general, during this unit I used a lot of materials from two units developed by the Stanford Program on International and Cross-cultural Education (SPICE): *Japan Meets the West: A Case Study of Perceptions and Castle Towns: An Introduction To Tokugawa Japan*. They provided fantastic materials and were extremely helpful supplementing the materials I had developed on my own. I still question whether this was truly a

nonwestern method of teaching, but at this point I consider the journey as equally important as the destination. Did the students develop another viewpoint of these events? According to the comments made during class discussions I am not sure. Looking at the results of the surveys I am hopeful. Some of the answers on the survey could be the students trying to give me the answers they believe I want to see, but the one truly interesting piece of data is the fact that the students questioned their perceptions and found them to be less accurate after the unit in comparison to before the unit when they considered their perceptions to be more accurate with less information.

Final Thoughts

Over the course of this project I came up with many more questions than I did answers. I did, however, find myself more focused in some aspects of my educational philosophy. I have found educational research that truly interests me and allows me to better articulate things which I feel are important in education. According to James A. Banks in his article "Citizenship Education and Diversity" in the Jan/Feb issue of the Journal of Teacher Education:

Students need to understand how life in their cultural communities and nations influence other nations and the cogent influence that international events have on their daily lives. Global education should have as major goals helping students to develop understanding of the interdependence among nations in the world today, clarified attitudes toward other nations, and reflective identifications with the world community. (Banks, 8)

I have learned about my students and found a theme that I wished to explore.

Teachers have to engage in a process of self-transformation.

Teachers have to begin to see that I am the other and the other is me. That I have to transform. That in the long run our fates are tied. That the fate of immigrant children is my future, that our fates are intimately connected. And that my journey is the journey of all people. (Banks, 11)

This is the road I have decided to take; a journey I hope to continue.

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