

Teaching About Asia: Action Plan for Implementation of East Asian Content

9th grade English

Ringgold High School

Ringgold, Georgia

2008-09 School year

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For the upcoming school year, I have accepted a position at Ringgold High School, a large public school in a small community a short drive from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Although I have taught on the high school level for many years, I am returning to it after a ten year absence, during which time I raised two children and taught on the elementary level. Through my previous teaching assignment at Graysville Elementary School in Ringgold, I was made aware of the NCTA-Asia Seminar. I had taught a Japan unit in my second grade class at GES last year. I signed up for the Asia Seminar before learning that I would be transferred to Ringgold High School. Determining to go ahead with the seminar, I have been delighted to learn how I can apply the history and culture that I have learned to literature lessons for my upcoming year as a ninth grade teacher. I am also excited at the prospect of working with history and art teachers for cross-curricular integration of Asian studies.

As a 9th grade teacher, I will be very involved with Freshman Academy, an important part of a ninth grader's life at Ringgold High School. Students rotate throughout the day in ninety-minute "block" scheduling, and courses change each semester. The English language curriculum is heavily tied to Georgia Performance Standards and is guided by a unit entitled "Who Am I" which is meant to actively engage students through self-definition and self-awareness. These goals are achieved through studies in reading and writing. Although the standards and the unit are prescribed for me, I have freedom to incorporate works from a wide body of literature. Because of this freedom, I can introduce various works by Asian writers while discussing elements of Asian culture and history that seem to be ignored in many American schools.

As a general rule, teenagers tend to be self-focused and have some difficulty seeing the big picture as it relates to them. For instance, the loss of a friendship can far outweigh the importance of national political concerns or natural disasters with huge consequences. Because my students are already more concerned with their inner world and the microcosm of high school

life in all of its apparent complexities, a unit exploring self-discovery has great potential for interaction, especially when integrating works such as 10th century Japanese writer Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*. I feel sure that students will readily connect with her opinions about everyday life. Having my students read excerpts from *Pillow Book* would be a great way to introduce journal responses to literature that would fit nicely with the prescribed unit, and students will get experience reading non-fiction biographical pieces. I plan to begin the *Pillow Book* lessons by exposing my students to written or oral excerpts without telling them the source. I will then ask their opinions as to the writer's age, where she lived, and when she lived. Before giving away the answers, I will ask them how they can relate to her experiences. This will lay groundwork for allowing my students to see that the differences between them and the writer don't seem so significant.

Shonagon's work can also open class discussion about Asian culture and the contemporary benefits as well as the historical use of such works that focus on the writer's view of society and how she is affected within its framework. This can be achieved by small group discussions and various journal responses that focus on Shonagon's **Japanese** culture and the students' response to current American culture, finding points of comparison for class discussion. After studying excerpts from *Pillow Book* and other prose passages from **Japanese diaries**, students will be asked to write their own diary entries of historical significance as it applies to their daily lives. Together, we can learn from these works that our own observations and concerns are not so far removed from those of foreign writers with strikingly different beliefs and cultures who wrote more than 1,000 years ago. This type of study makes the world seem a much smaller place for students, and allows them to see that time and geography really do little to change basic human needs and observations. This can be further followed up with comparisons to other Western literature that speaks to everyday life, such as Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, which will be very accessible for students of all levels. Essay writing can be incorporated into the assessment process, and students will be able to practice not only the skill of analyzing literature through comparison, but also proper essay format.

Other Asian art forms easily accessible to students are various forms of poetry, especially haiku. So much of Japanese thought, belief, and culture can be taught through a study of haiku. This is a study that boys, who many times have strong aversions to poetry because it's considered feminine, can get interested in because of its link to warriors, specifically the

samurai. Our unit has a poetry section that requires students to write their own verse. Haiku will fit this requirement well. It is not as intimidating to read or write. Its form is structured, but only by number of syllables and lines. Haiku's subject matter is widely accessible and simple.

Teaching haiku by introducing the masters such as Koboyashi Issa and Matsuo Batsho will open the student to wonderful examples of the simple beauty of this writing. Hopefully, students will be inspired to write many verses of their own, since they are not bound by harsher guidelines of rhyme and rhythm that other poetic forms require. A study in haiku as a focus (or snapshot) of nature can lead to a comparative study of nature poets from Western cultures (Wordsworth, Emerson). This can build a bridge of commonality between Eastern and Western thought through the art of poetry. Through this study of Japanese poetry, students will be stretched to see the inspiring in the simple and the difficulty in making a simple work of written art have impact. Possibly they will understand the discipline of singular focus as well as the art of being still long enough to absorb the humility that is in the natural world.

Since American youth seem to be infatuated with current popular Japanese literature, I hope to be able to bring in more contemporary forms of writing as I gauge what my students are currently reading. Manga and anime have a very large following among teenagers in this country as well as in Japan. In that aspect alone, they can feel some sense of commonality with an Asian culture. I was made aware of the manga craze in our own country when my middle school aged son asked me to take him to the bookstore to buy a book. (No mom who's a teacher will deny that request!) This was my first foray into the world of manga, and I was absolutely amazed at the amount of books available. After thumbing through some of the books, I found right away that parents need to be cautious about what their kids choose, and teachers need to be cautious about what they can recommend. Nevertheless, I saw that my son was totally hooked by the stories and artwork. My goal is to read some of the popular writers and determine what, if any, could be used in my class or recommended for reports. One thing is certain, many of our kids are getting their own lesson in Japanese culture through pop literature. I would hope to build on this current craze and use it to "hook" those students who are somewhat belligerent toward reading. Possibly manga can be used as a "mini-report" or at least a way to teach some literary conventions such as plot and dialogue to reveal character development. I may find some opposition in that these are seen by many as another form of comic books, but if it entices even one student to get excited about reading, I am willing to work within its parameters.

In thinking about how to integrate Asian literature into my course this year, I do not want to ignore Korean literature. Since I will be covering non-fiction/autobiography using *Pillow Book*, poetry using haiku, and pop literature using manga, I realized I could use the novel and short story to introduce Korea. If I have the time to devote to a class wide novel study, I would like to possibly use the novel *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park.

There are two other novels by Marie Lee that may be good possibilities for a class study: *If it Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun* or *Finding my Voice*. When searching for young adult Asian literature, I only found Asian-American, but I feel that these will be a good introduction to Asian thought and even struggle within American culture. I plan to have interactive class presentations in a group setting so that my students will be able to share and learn from each other as they create art, comparative projects, response writing, and a variety of other activities. Students will have plenty of opportunity to recognize, respond to, and write about aspects of Korean life as portrayed in any one of these novels.

Because literature as an art form is a window to the culture, beliefs, and experiences of an age, I have a hard time divorcing it from other forms of art. In order to further illustrate the times of the works that we will study, I plan to use visual and dramatic arts to widen the artistic experience for my students. I hope to find affordable East Asian art and calligraphy to use for classroom display. There may well be some budding anime artists in my class, whose work I could also display. As time allows, I will enhance lessons with short DVD/video presentations that will further explain Asian dramatic arts such as Noh and Kabuki. These visual and dramatic art samples will be used to further interest and educate my students in Asian art forms as they are reflected in writing and vice versa.

Human nature tells us to fear that which we are not sure of, the things of which we are uneducated. That certainly applies to the mindset of many Americans toward those who are Asian. Because we don't understand the Asian people, we rush to judgment about their cultures and beliefs and actions, whether historical or contemporary. I believe that teachers can do much to dispel such judgment by offering insight through education.

Teaching about Asia through the avenue of literature is a very effective way to begin the changes in American attitude that are necessary if we are to survive in a world that is increasingly made smaller each day. My plan for this year is to present Asia through literature in

a way that enlightens, educates, and piques the interest of my ninth graders.

I would add one “disclaimer” to my plan. This will be my first year at Ringgold High, and I am very intent on following the school’s prescribed plan of action for 9th grade. However, in speaking with my fellow English teachers, I am confident that I will be able to include a fair amount of Asian literature. One of my top priorities is to fill my book shelves with Asian “loaner” books, both fiction and non-fiction, for my kids to enjoy.

Also, I look forward to meeting other teachers, such as the art and social studies teachers, with whom I can work to make our students’ experience richer. Of course, I will become fast friends with the media specialists who will help add a variety of Asian literature to our library. At this point, I have a very positive outlook for being able to integrate Asian content into my long range plans for the upcoming semester, and I am excited about the new worlds that will open for my students. I am grateful that I was able to participate in the NCTA-East Asia seminar. My eyes have been opened to the richness, diversity, and beauty of a region that I knew little about. Now it’s my turn to open some eyes.