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INVESTIGATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AN EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Background

March 13, 2020. Eight senior high school students arrived in ones and twos to their Asian Studies class. It was the last class of the day on a dreary Friday afternoon, but that day's discussion promised to be a lively one; should the United States have dropped the atomic bombs? Even in such a small class, I knew there was a full range of opinions on this issue—everything from the war-hawkish “teach them a lesson,” to liberal doves’ “the war was already won,” to heartbreaking teenage apathy. The students had already read about and discussed Japan's descent into fascism, China's foreign and domestic conflicts, US imperialism in the Pacific, and the general conduct of the war. Despite their best efforts to hide it, I could tell the students were excited to engage in a healthy argument.

The announcement came twelve minutes into the period. The school was canceling in-person classes for the next two weeks. Though we did not know it at the time, two weeks would become three and a half months. While this interruption to live instruction came as a surprise to most of our students, teachers and administrators had been anticipating the change for some time. “Bridge” lessons were

finalized and posted online almost immediately. Plans were developed for continuity of learning at the course, department, and building level. But one thing was obvious, my curriculum was out the window. As we have all so painfully learned, the COVID-19 pandemic touched everything, and my little Asian Studies class was no exception.

We struggled on with chapter readings, online discussions, and awkward Google Hangout meetings for the next two weeks. The novelty wore off very quickly, and it was clear that my students' interest and level of engagement was waning at an alarming rate. Keeping seniors engaged through the spring is hard enough; doing it in a remote learning environment seemed nearly impossible. When it was announced that remote learning would continue through at least May 1, I realized we needed a project that was engaging and relevant.

My students were already asking many questions about the pandemic. Not only was this virus robbing them of their senior year, it was threatening their plans for colleges and careers. Its origins in China and rapid spread throughout East Asia made for an obvious connection to the course. The topic also easily lends itself to connections with the NCSS Ten Themes and the C3 Inquiry Arc.¹ My task, then, was to build an inquiry-based project that met three requirements. First, use current events to promote historical inquiry. Second, help students understand the powerful forces that were threatening to change their lives in such dramatic ways. And finally, navigate and appropriately filter the tidal wave of information about the pandemic that was flowing through the twenty-four-hour news outlets.

Process

A good inquiry-based project always begins with a compelling question, one that forces students to dig below surface-level answers and find deep, meaningful connections to the past.² Typically, we would develop the compelling question together in class. Unfortunately, in the virtual learning environment, class meetings were infrequent and not mandatory. I therefore developed the following question myself and presented it to my students in a Google Meeting without any prior warning or instruction: *What historical events and cultural elements have influenced various countries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

What followed was a remarkably interesting, frustrating, and yet fruitful brainstorming session that eventually led to a detailed explication of the question. A compelling question often demands that we ask smaller, more pointed, supporting questions.³ Which countries do we want to focus on? What do we mean by "responses"? And most importantly, how do we go about drawing lines between historical events, cultural elements, and the current situation? R. Kieth Sawyer points out that "learning sciences research has found that deep understanding occurs when a learner actively constructs meaning based on his or

her experiences and interaction in the world.”⁴ In order to meet my second goal of deeply understanding the issue, I felt it was important for the students to play an active role in defining the parameters of the project.

The Asian Studies course is designed to follow the AP World History periodization and structure with a focus on Asia. Any experienced world history teacher will recognize the difficulty in limiting the scope of a course to one region, especially one as large and diverse as Asia. For the purposes of this course, Asia is defined as everything from Egypt to Japan and Siberia to Indonesia. Of course, Asia’s influence on Europe and Europe’s later influence on Asia is not ignored, but our intent is always to look at Asia from an Asian perspective, rather than the more traditional approach of looking at Asia from a European perspective. This approach positions the student in Asia, looking at inter-Asian connections and occasionally looking out from Asia toward the non-Asian world. In doing so, we “de-other” Asian people and their histories.

In this project, we further limited the scope to only East, South, and Southeast Asian countries. This decision was due to the wealth of information available on this area and the lack thereof on southwest and central Asia. At the insistence of my students, we also decided to compare the responses of two Asian countries to each other and then to that of the United States. Incorporating the US response into the project turned out to be a great way of addressing my last two requirements, those of understanding the pandemic and navigating the flow of information.

We also tackled issues such as defining “response,” whether this referred to the government’s actions or those of the people. We decided that this was an issue that each student needed to address directly as it related to the fundamental question of historical events and cultural elements.

This then led us to the final and most difficult portion of the project, which was to make connections between historical events, culture, and the present. While this was challenging for most students, and some fell short of the goal, it was a wonderful opportunity for them to think and write like historians. Not surprisingly, the students were worried about being wrong in their conclusions. My response was, “Welcome to academic writing. If we had more time, we would publish your papers and submit them to peer review.” While this did little to settle their nerves, it did put them in the mindset of making a case and supporting it with evidence.

By the end of our first discussion, we had a compelling question, some argument stems, and several supporting questions. We could now begin to identify and filter our sources. Due to the daily torrent of information on COVID-19, I recognized that my students could very easily become swamped with information. Despite the district’s best efforts, and those of many of my fellow educators, students continue



Figure 1: In gratitude for the Navajo veterans who served in the Korean War, the South Korean government donated 10,000 masks and other PPE to the Navajo Nation during COVID-19 pandemic. Office of Greg Stanton, United States Congress. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

to struggle to identify reliable sources. Most importantly, they do not easily differentiate between opinion-based, analytical, investigative, and informational pieces. Counter to my first inclination and standard practice, I decided to provide them with a resource list. Thankfully, I did not have to curate this list myself. The staff and alumni of the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) were of great assistance in developing an extensive list of resources to help students get started.

The students were required to have three mainstream media sources for each country they chose to discuss. At least one of the three they had to find on their own; the others could come from our resource list. For each resource, they had to identify the author, audience, claim, and evidence. This is the standard model we use in our social studies courses for grades seven through twelve. The struggle for most students, though, is to get beyond this summary technique and connect the article's key claim with their own. Therefore, about two weeks into the project, we had to take a break and go back and reevaluate some of their article choices.

I asked each student to provide a one- or two-sentence summary of how the article supported their initial claim. As one can imagine, the students were not thrilled at having to take a step back and potentially find new articles. However, this road bump proved useful in helping the students clarify their central claim. Many students discovered that rather than building a case, they were simply describing the flow of events. While this was a painful process, the results were greatly beneficial. As a result, students were better able to articulate their initial claim. For example, one student wrote:

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been devastating to people's lives, as well as the state of nations across the world. Different countries have responded to the pandemic in a variety of methods, whether successful or unsuccessful, that reflect the state of their government and domestic nature. By looking at the responses of India and Singapore to the pandemic, it becomes evident how the nature of the country in terms of politics, economics, and cultural aspects affects its responses to a global crisis.

Another claimed that:

The recent outbreak of COVID-19, the disease caused by the newly discovered severe acute respiratory syndrome SARS-CoV-2, took the world by storm. World leaders and health officials around the world came up with different methods to control this pandemic. Many countries made their own rules and regulations that fit their countries and people best. South Korea has been leading the fight against this virus, while Japan has quickly fallen short compared to other countries.

Admittedly, both paragraphs have some issues, but they provide the students with the opportunity to support their claim. From there, each student developed an outline and began to build their final product.

Results

Generally speaking, the students did well in using and analyzing media accounts. They used the articles to support their claims effectively. For example, one student wrote:

When being compared to how Europe and the US responded, Max Fisher and Choe Sang-hun at the *New York Times* stated, "South Koreans, unlike Europeans and Americans, were also primed to treat the coronavirus as a national emergency, after a 2015 outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome in the country killed 38."

The student made a link between the South Korean response and that of Europe and the United States and tied it into a historical event, the 2015 MERS outbreak.

In our post-project meeting, most students agreed that they now had a better understanding of the virus, how it spread, and why each country's response differed so greatly. While they still expressed concern over the future, they felt that the activity was beneficial to their understanding of the issue. Most notably, several students expressed a deeper understanding of the difference between the government's response and that of the people, especially here in the United States.

Overall, the project met each of my three requirements. Students developed a better appreciation for the complexity of the issue, and they were able to analyze and filter media sources. Where the project fell short was in answering the compelling question.

No student adequately managed to link historical events and culture to the national response. Surprisingly, there was no reference to individualist versus collectivist cultures. Nor did any student make meaningful connections to environmental influences, population density, family structures, or economic activity. This shortcoming may be due to several factors. While we discussed these concepts at length throughout the course, I gave no specific instructions to incorporate them into the project. The remote learning environment, in which students were not required to attend online meetings, limited the amount of discussion about the project throughout the process. And finally, the district's decision to make all fourth-quarter grades pass/fail, while understandable and justified, led to a "just get it done" mentality.

Next Steps

It is an unfortunate reality that this project will continue to be relevant and applicable for several years. While my first attempt was only moderately successful, with some modifications I believe it can be highly effective. There are three changes I will be implementing for next year. The project will be introduced earlier in the year to serve as a primer. Considering the wide range of ability levels among my students, and the complexity of the project, a higher degree of scaffolding is necessary. Finally, students will be placed into heterogeneous ability groups.

Introducing the project early in the year, perhaps even on the first day of class, provides a compelling question that is both relevant and rigorous. Great teachers leverage their students' experiences, insights, and passions into their lessons.⁵ This compelling question gives students of all ability levels something to bite into and shifts the focus of the class from performance goals to mastery learning.⁶ Rather than being a one off project that "just needs to be completed," the inquiry becomes an ongoing investigation for which we, as a class, are finding evidence.

This process of building a case, based on evidence, will require a level of scaffolding commensurate to the ability level of the class. Using the *Inquiry Design Model* allows the teacher to schedule periodic check-ins and benchmark assessments. Having already provided the compelling question, and having worked with students to develop supporting questions, the project can be revisited at the conclusion of each unit. Specific performance tasks along the way will assist students in applying the learning goals of the unit to the inquiry lesson.⁷ For example, at the conclusion of our unit on ancient China, students might write a brief essay comparing how Legalists and Confucians would have dealt with an epidemic. A uniform rubric for each performance task helps students organize their reflections and remain focused on the compelling question. Throughout the year, students will accumulate evidence, in both the form of sources and their own performance assessments, to assist in the final task of making connections between past and present.

As every teacher quickly learns, not every student enters class with the same level of background knowledge. Contrary to what one might think, this is particularly true in a specialized elective such as Asian Studies. A perceptive teacher also recognizes that students learn a great deal from each other, and providing students with opportunities to express their knowledge deepens their understanding.⁸ Organizing students into heterogeneous groups facilitates this learning. The teacher's active participation in each group ensures that students do not draw incorrect conclusions. Late May is not the ideal time for reteaching concepts.

With these three major adjustments in mind—introducing the inquiry very early in the year, scaffolding as necessary, and heterogeneous grouping—I believe this project can be a highly effective vehicle for helping students tackle a relevant issue, filter current media sources, and connect the past to the present.

The project design can also be used to investigate similar historic events. Utilizing primary documents, students could research national responses to the 1918 influenza pandemic, the American polio epidemic, or the 1957 Asian flu epidemic for example. The compelling question might remain very much the same, while supporting questions could vary considerably. Students might focus their attention on how mass media was produced and consumed at that time and what impact it had on national responses. They may choose to consider how economic activity at that time and in that place limited or exacerbated the outbreak. What I find most valuable about inquiry-based projects such as this is the great variety of avenues that are available for students. In this way, the opportunity for engagement is high and students are more likely to retain the learning for a longer period and apply that learning to other problems.

Notes

¹ First published in 1994 by the National Council for the Social Studies, the 2010 revision provides ten interrelated themes that serve as a guide for curriculum articulation and alignment. National Council for the Social Studies, National Curriculum Standards or Social Studies: Introduction, 2010, <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/introduction> (accessed July 10, 2020).

² The purpose of the C3 Framework is to help districts design a social studies curriculum that teaches students to develop “the intellectual power to recognize societal problems; ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible solutions and consequences; separate evidence-based claims from parochial opinions; and communicate and act upon what they learn.” Kathy Swan, “College, Career and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards,” in *College, Career & Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies), 6.

³ Swan, “College, Career, and Civic Life C3 Framework,” 25.

⁴ Joseph S. Krajcik and Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, “Project-Based Learning,” *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences*, ed. by R. Keith Sawyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 317–334.

⁵ Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (United States: National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, 2018), 29–30.

⁶ P. R. Pintrich, “Multiple Goals, Multiple Pathways: The Role of Goal Orientation in Learning and Achievement,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, no. 92 (2000) quoted in Paul A. Kirschner and Carl Hendrick, *How Learning Happens: Seminal Works in Educational Psychology and What They Mean in Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 106–111.

⁷ Swan, *Inquiry Design Model*, 84.

⁸ E. Z. Rothkopf, “The Concept of Mathemagenic Activities,” *Review of Education Research*, no. 40 (1970) quoted in Paul A. Kirschner and Carl Hendrick, *How Learning Happens: Seminal Works in Educational Psychology and What They Mean in Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 144–152.

Appendix

Designing an inquiry-based project is a collaborative process between the teacher and students. Using the format provided here can help guide the design process. This form is adapted from the National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life framework (NCSS C3) and can be modified to meet the needs of almost any topic. I have provided the compelling question that we used for our COVID-19 project in Asian Studies. It may also be beneficial to track changes to the document during the process. That way, students can see the development of their compelling question, supporting questions, and sources.

COVID-19 in East Asia

Name: _____

Designing Your Report			
Your Compelling Question	What historical events and cultural elements have influenced various countries' responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic?		
The Countries you are focusing on			USA
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	
Sources for _____	Sources for _____	Sources for _____	
My Thesis			
Major takeaways and Big Understandings			