

Walking the Tōkaidō Road with my Students

by Andrew Glasier

In the summer of 2021 I was lucky enough to join a unique professional development opportunity through Five College Center for East Asia Studies. The opportunity was to virtually walk the Tōkaidō Road of pre-modern Japan, while also reading, researching, watching videos, and discussing with other participants along the way at several “stops” that the center had created. I downloaded the *My Virtual Mission* (MVM) app and began to walk my dog, ride my bike and go for runs on the Tōkaidō Road. As I accumulated miles, I enjoyed the books that were sent to me, the videos that were included on our website, and especially the online discussion with other teachers about the material and how we hoped to use it in our classrooms. The MVM app allowed us to see where we were and even allowed us to zoom down to street view at the exact spot on the road we were in the present day. It was a fantastic experience.

I teach at Shaker Heights High, in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. One of my classes is an Asian Studies course, that concentrates on one country per year. We use to team teach the class in the evenings, once per week for two and a half hours, and have a relationship with the Cleveland Museum of Art, which has an extensive Asian art collection. That coming school year I was bracing for unprecedented changes as we were beginning the school year with COVID still an issue, after spending most of the previous year online, and the class being moved to a regular slot during the day. This was just some of the major changes I had to deal with that August as I prepared for the uncertainty. How will I keep the students engaged and learning in this new format?

It was then that I asked the Director of the Five College Center, Anne Prescott, if I might use the virtual tour experience with my students. Anne generously said yes and even offered to pay for my students access to the app. Now I had to begin the process of how I would have students complete it, how much time would I give it, and where it would fit in my curriculum.

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Since our district uses Google products, I knew I would incorporate Google Classroom to host the material. I also decided that I would make it their only homework assignment for the first semester. This would give them plenty of time to complete the 320 miles. I also went over the conversion chart that was provided by *My Virtual Mission* so they understood there were many ways to reach our destination. Then the last thing was to decide how many stations or stops to have and what the students would complete on those stops. For that, I used the Center’s requirements as guides and began to pare down the material to make it attainable for high school students. I knew I could not use the books, but found good articles, lots of videos, and other resources that I hoped would engage the students.

Building these stations on Google Classroom took some time. I kept with the themes that the Center had used; examining the poetry of Bashō at the Tsuchiyama Stop for instance. Some I made optional and some required, a technique used also by the Center.

With the help of Anne, we got the students on to the app, not an entirely painless task. We covered the first stop, Nihonbashi Bridge together, and then I let the students go.

On a few occasions, on beautiful weather days, I would take the class on a walk around the school neighborhood and into a local park, bringing pictures and stories I had collected during the summer of stops around where they should be. We would then stop on our walk, I would read from a primary source, show Hokusai prints, discuss some questions, and then move on. When returning to the classroom, we would all look at our locations in present day Japan and had discussions about our experiences. The large map on the MVM app allowed me and the students to see where they were compared to other students. Those that fell behind, I encouraged to think about all the steps they took in a day, that they could earn steps at their different athletic practices and so on. Then one of my students told me that if the students had iPhones, they could connect the Apple Health app to the MVM, so that it automatically updated the app and your location with the steps that your phone read. This really helped get students moving, as it was one less step.

Throughout the semester, I would occasionally plan a lesson around the stops. Around the time the students should have been around the Kanaya stop, we had a green tea tasting and did some research on the importance of tea in Japanese culture. We examined the Japanese baseball league during the World Series. We continued on our walks on nice days and continued to move closer to our goal, Kyoto.

There were definitely adjustments along the way. At first I allowed the students to just complete the assignments as they got to the stations. I soon realized in the COVID era, deadlines were necessary. I also realized that many of their answers in the discussion board were one sentence and shallow. I soon required deeper responses and used a rubric so they understood their requirements. Some less engaged students hadn’t bothered to get on the app at the beginning and never came to me to do so. I had to catch them up and required they come after school until they caught up. During some stretches, I often forgot the assignment and focused on other curriculum, which usually led to students falling behind. I made sure I touched on the road at least once per class, even briefly, so the students reconnected to the assignment, sometimes just projecting the map to see where they were.

At the end of the assignment, as students reached Kyoto, we held a ceremony to honor their journey, with the student receiving my favorite Japanese candy as a prize. The students would have to talk about what they learned on the journey, and what they would do differently. Many students liked how the journey included historical information but also current issues. The diversity of the stops, from poetry to baseball, pollution to tea, kept their interest. Many loved looking at the street view of where they stood at that moment on the journey and found it so interesting that most were on just a normal residential street.

I want to personally thank Anne Prescott and the Five College Center for East Asia Studies for allowing me to host this opportunity for myself and my students. I learned so much from my experience and believe my students did too. I have many ideas about the next time on how to better the process and can’t wait to try it again. ♦

ANDREW GLASIER is a social studies teacher at Shaker Heights High School, where he has worked for twenty-four years. Since 2014, he has taught the Asian Studies course, which focuses on one country per year and then creates the opportunity to travel to that country, including Japan, China, and Korea. He is also a creator and coordinator of the teacher peer-evaluation program and the publications editor of the Shaker Heights Teachers’ Association. Andrew lives in Bedford, Ohio with his lovely wife, Kristi, daughter Amelia, and good dog Rufus.