Bridging the Gap Between University and School Asianists

The "Humanities Team" (Lesley Solomon, center) accepting an award from the New Jersey Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

For a variety of reasons, Asia is largely neglected in the nation's schools. In recent years there appears to be a growing interest among college and university-level Asianists to work with school teachers who are interested in increasing student understanding of Asia. However, in part because the school and the university are in many ways two different cultures, collaboration is not an easy process. Lesley Solomon is perhaps one of the most uniquely qualified people in the United States with whom to explore the issue of how Asia can be promoted in the nation's schools.

Lesley Solomon received her B.A. in History and M.A. and Ph.D. in International Relations with a concentration in East Asian History and Government. For the past 17 years, Lesley has taught History, English, and Humanities in two high schools in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Solomon has won numerous teaching awards, including being selected as New Jersey's 1995 Humanities Teacher of the Year. Solomon is currently president of the Mid-Atlantic Conference of the Association of Asian Studies. In the following interview with *EAA* editor Lucien Ellington, Solomon discusses how her interest in Asia developed, her own classroom efforts, and how university professors and school teachers might more effectively collaborate to improve student understanding of Asia. *Interview begins on page16*

"LIKE MANY EDUCATORS, I COULD NO LONGER WILLINGLY TEACH A CURRICULUM THAT WAS NOT MEETING THE NEEDS OF LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY STUDENTS. . . . AMERICAN STUDENTS MUST LEARN ABOUT THE VALUES, THE HISTORIES, AND THE LITERATURE OF NON-WESTERN CULTURES."

ELLINGTON: *How did you become interested in Asian studies?*

SOLOMON
As a history student at the University of Pennsylvania in the l960s, I decided to take a course which was off the beaten track for most history majors. The course was "An Introduction to Asian History" taught by Professor F. Hilary Conroy. Fifteen years later, Dr. Conroy would serve as my dissertation advisor. As the course introduced me to the history of this part of the world, I could not understand why this important material had not been a part of my regular high school and college history curriculums. Unfortunately, Asian history and cultures were still virtually invisible from the high school program when I resumed my teaching career in the late l970s. Upon graduation from college, I began my teaching career as a history teacher at the Masterman Junior High School in Philadelphia. At the same time, I pursued my interest in Asian history at the University of Pennsylvania. Eventually, I received an M.A. and later a Ph.D. in International Relations with a concentration in East Asian history and government. When I returned to teaching as a high school teacher, my major focus became the introduction of Asian studies into a Western-oriented curriculum. Moreover, I decided to adopt the interdisciplinary approach used in the International Relations program at Penn.

ELLINGTON : *What have you done in your high school classes to incorporate Asia into the subjects you teach?*

SOLOMON
I took two approaches: the first was to develop an interdisciplinary Asian studies elective to provide an alternative to a required curriculum which was almost completely eurocentric in the early l980s. Secondly, I chaired a committee which created for the Cherry Hill, New Jersey schools an integrated World History course including a significant portion of material on Asia. We established this course as the required history curriculum for the ninth grade in the fall of l99l. Much like the World History Standards Jean Johnson addressed in the last issue, our course considered different parts of the world during a particular time period. In order to facilitate comparison and contrast, we established a theme for each time period. For example, our theme for ancient civilizations was "Early Civilizations Flourish by Using the Environment Effectively." We introduced the theme with an article about how early human beings trashed the environment just as we do today. Then, we discussed early civilizations in Egypt, Nubia, China, Greece, and Central America. Finding a text for the course represented a major problem. One group of texts dealt with each geographic area separately. On the other hand, several world history texts were recently converted Western civilization texts which focused on the development of European civilizations. Asian history was shortchanged, and African and Latin American history was almost nonexistent until the age of European imperialism. Finally, we developed detailed outlines for each cross-cultural unit, thus creating our own text. In addition, we gathered supplemental materials, and many of them were primary sources. Facilitating cross-cultural comparisons, these sources enabled students to compare the Confucian concept of good government with that of Lao Tzu. Then both of these concepts could be compared with Aristotle's model of the ideal government. Finally, students could discuss the influence of the philosophers' ideas on the course of their civilizations.

THE ASIAN STUDIES ELECTIVE REPRESENTED A LABOR OF LOVE. I had taught history and English at the middle and high school levels as well as an introductory course in international relations at Pennsylvania State University's Ogontz Campus. I had worked in both city and suburban schools. Remarkably similar to my own high school education in the late l950s, the history and literature curriculums I had taught were Western-centered in both outlook and content. Like many educators, I could no longer willingly teach a curriculum that was not meeting the needs of late twentieth century students. In terms of content, the decline of the bi-polar system made apparent to all what had always been obvious to Asianists: that American students must learn about the values, the histories, and the literature of non-Western cultures. The increasing percentage of Latino, Asian, and African-American students in the schools made this need more urgent. Moreover, this balanced content had to be introduced at the secondary level. Since many colleges nowadays allow almost unlimited freedom of choice in liberal arts courses, even the majority of college-bound students would not otherwise acquire a global education.

AS I DESIGNED MY NEW COURSE, I hoped to engender the enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity I found in the World Affairs Club which I sponsored. Meeting once or twice a month to discuss international affairs, the club members organized a Model United Nations each year for over two hundred students in the South Jersey area. Moreover, the learning process was quite painless; in fact, the students were participating voluntarily, often devoting many extra hours preparing for the Model United Nations and other simulations. As I sought to transfer this attitude to the regular classroom, I learned from my colleagues at the Philadelphia World Affairs Council that some public school districts around the country had instituted International Studies programs as part of the regular curriculum. With the aid of a grant from the Council, I spent a year studying these programs. They ranged from four-year academies, to schools-within-schools, to single courses. At the Hillcrest High School, a public high school in Queens, New York, my department head, Marguerite Smaldore, and I observed an elective International Studies/Humanities program that served ultimately as a model for our own program. The Hillcrest program took the student on a two-year "World Tour," an elective course which introduced the students to major world cultures. Meeting three periods per day with a team of three teachers, the students studied the history, literature, culture and art of eight geographic areas.
My second problem involved writing such a curriculum.

Developing an interdisciplinary course represented an ambitious project. While my own studies in history and international relations prepared me to teach those areas, I knew little about the literature and art which I had promised to incorporate. Although I had been aware that the Delaware Valley was a culturally rich area, I was surprised by the number of institutions and people to whom I could turn. For example, I attended a wonderful mini-course on "The Modern Literature of the Middle East" at Princeton University. At the Abington campus of Pennsylvania State University, I took a course in Asian art. Montclair University in northern New Jersey hosted a week-long seminar on the literature of China and Japan. Choosing literature in translation that was appropriate for high school students, speakers provided cultural background and showed how the works could be taught. As I acquired information, lists of books, and invaluable personal contacts, I realized that these resources should be available to students as well. In the first year of the course, my art teacher at Penn State presented a slide/lecture on Indian art to my class. Each year the Middle East Center at Princeton invited the Humanities class to a discussion of current issues by some of their finest professors of Middle Eastern studies. Most recently, Ainslee Embree and Barbara Gombach of the South Asia program at Columbia University organized an interdisciplinary study of South Asia for teams of high school teachers. Using an NEH grant and the teaching staff of Columbia and other area universities, they conducted seminars, supervised the writing of model teaching units, and even observed our classes.

By the spring of 1987, we were ready to publish the elective course description in the Cherry Hill East booklet of course offerings (see inset).

As an interdisciplinary elective, our course was taught by a history, an English, and an art teacher. In practice, the Humanities team followed the course description quite faithfully. While we were allotted three periods per week for team planning, the time was never adequate for the necessary coordination of three disciplines, three teaching styles, and three personalities. At least once a month, a marathon dinner planning session occurred. At the beginning of each unit, the students received a syllabus of required readings. These included texts, packets of articles and primary sources, and indigenous literature. The students read traditional works such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* selections from the *Analects* and the *Tao Te Ching*, as well as twentieth century writings by Kawabata, Lu Hsun, and Narayan. The major themes of each unit included religious or philosophical core values, the flowering of the culture, empire-building, the impact of the West, and modern attempts to synthesize traditional and western values. By repeating these themes, we encouraged students to make cross-cultural comparisons. Because we had the luxury of three teachers and an hour and a half time block, we experimented with many groupings. Sometimes our fifty students were divided into three seminars; on other days, the entire class viewed slides or broke into groups for discussions of interdisciplinary topics.

Working to make students responsible for their own learning, the Humanities teachers required a research project and an oral presentation or "area of expertise" for each marking period. At the end of each geographic unit, a group of students conducted a two-day "cultural roundup" which often attracted teachers on their off-periods who knew they could expect an elaborate meal. During the roundup, the students reviewed the material of the unit through discussion, skits, speakers, music and dance, outside speakers, slide presentations, and original videos. For students who selected honors credit, the independent study project provided a challenge for the second semester. Choosing one of the three teachers as a mentor, each student identified an interdisciplinary topic and developed a research design. We encouraged the students to develop a creative method of presentation. Examining the social values of various immigrant groups in Cherry Hill, one student brought in members of the community and conducted a panel discussion. Two other students published an elaborate book of rules and gave each student and teacher a print-out of vital statistics on one country. Then they led the class through a week-long world game of international conflict and negotiation.

Besides promoting individual growth, the Humanities course fostered social consciousness. During a period of increasingly overt racism in America, the Eastern Cultures course has encouraged understanding and empathy. Cherry

Introduction to Eastern Cultures A Humanities Approach*

This course introduces junior and senior students to major non-Western cultures of the world—the Middle East; Africa; China; Japan; Korea; India; and the Soviet Union. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, the course integrates the study of history, literature, culture, and the visual arts. Speakers, as well as other resources from the many internationally-conscious educational, cultural, and business organizations of the Delaware Valley, are used extensively. The development of writing, critical thinking, and speaking skills, and analysis of art and architecture represent the major focus. The course will be activity-centered. Students are expected to conduct research, write position papers, and participate in seminars, debates, and simulations. In addition, students will approach other cultures in creative ways such as painting, building architectural models, preparing meals, and learning dances. In order to allow time for interdisciplinary study, independent research, speakers, and trips, the course will meet two periods per day. Those students who wish to receive Honors credit must complete an independent study project.

*Elective course description in the Cherry Hill East booklet of course offerings.

"THUS FAR, OUR EFFORTS (MARAAS) HAVE BEEN TOWARD HELPING TEACHERS RATHER THAN INCLUDING THEM. I DON'T THINK WE HAVE GONE FAR ENOUGH. . . . IF WE WANT TEACHERS TO JOIN AND ATTEND OUR REGIONAL FALL CONFERENCES, WE MUST PROVIDE PANELS THAT MEET THEIR NEEDS."

Hill East students demonstrated obvious pride in discussing their own cultures. When a Hindu priest addressed the class, Indian students eagerly joined with him in a panel discussion. Other staff members, students, and even whole classes have joined with our students to hear speakers, debates, simulations, and cultural presentations. Members of our educational community, including both administrators and instructors, have served as guest experts affording students the opportunity to see individuals in a different role. For example, each year a science teacher and a math teacher shared with the students their experiences growing up in Korea and China.

For the Humanities teachers, the Eastern Cultures course proved a new experience in education. While the students seemed to acquire the knowledge and skills outlined in the course description, the most important outcome was somewhat unintended: we all, teachers and students, learned to function as members of a group. The class became a cohesive community within a large high school.

ELLINGTON: *How did you become interested in the Association for Asian Studies?*

SOLOMON

I was recruited as a "high school person" for the advisory council of the Mid-Atlantic Region by Bruce Robinson, an active member. It was through MARAAS that I became interested in the national organization.

ELLINGTON: *As President of the Mid-Atlantic Conference, you are obviously very active at the regional level. Since you may be the only high school teacher in AAS history to be in the leadership position you hold, could you inform our readers about your activities at the regional level?*

SOLOMON

I think it is important to note that it is not accidental that the Mid-Atlantic Region has elected the first president whose primary teaching experience is in high school. From the first meeting I attended, it was apparent that the active members of MAR were extremely interested in expanding their offerings to K-l2 teachers. The improvement of K-12 education on Asia represents a primary function of our organization. These initiatives are discussed at every board meeting. For this reason, my opinions on any sort of teacher outreach were always respected. My primary activities have been related to K-12 education. For about five years, I chaired the Wanek Essay Committee. Named for Marie Wanek, a former president, the Wanek Prize is awarded to two high school students, a winner and a runner-up, who write outstanding essays on an Asian topic. Last year's winner discussed the literature of Amy Tan. Besides my involvement with the essay contest, I have made presentations on an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about Asia at MARAAS's Teaching Asia Workshops for secondary teachers. For example, I joined with two teachers from Cherry Hill to present the teaching unit we developed for our Columbia grant. Using correspondence between Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore as well as Gandhi's *Autobiography*, we described an interdisciplinary unit on "Gandhi and Indian Nationalism" culminating in a debate patterned on "Crossfire." Generally, the Teaching Asia Workshop is held the day before the annual meeting in the fall. In l995, MARAAS, with supplemental funding from AAS, held a second teacher in-service in April led by Ray Wylie at Lehigh University. It is interesting to see how attendance at teacher workshops varies by state. Where there is a state mandate for global or Asian studies such as the requirement in New Jersey, attendance is high. When such a requirement does not exist, we have trouble attracting teachers. At Ramapo State University in New Jersey, which is near the border with New York (another state with a global mandate), MARAAS had to turn teachers away from its fall workshop for lack of room.

ELLINGTON: *Currently, there is much discussion within AAS about how the regional councils might better meet the needs of secondary and elementary teachers. What are your thoughts on this question?*

SOLOMON

Right now MARAAS, and, I assume, the other regional organizations, provide yearly workshops and an annual essay contest. We have sponsored a compilation of source materials on India by Donald and Jean Johnson. As a classroom teacher, I can attest to the fact that these materials complement the high school curriculum and provoke lively discussion. In addition, our newsletter contains an excellent Education Forum which provides educational material geared to K-12 teachers. Focusing on the secondary level, regional workshops have not generally addressed the needs of elementary teachers who show an increasing interest in Asia.

Thus far, our efforts have been toward helping teachers rather than including them. I don't think we have gone far enough. As the demand for K-12 teaching materials on Asia increases, it is imperative that the AAS and the regional councils clarify their mission. Do we wish to welcome school teachers as regular members of our national and regional organizations? Certainly they can join, but hardly any do. The fact that I am a rarity was underlined to me at the spring conference in Honolulu. Proudly wearing my name-tag with the affiliation "Cherry Hill Schools," I was asked, "What are you doing here?" A colleague affiliated with a large urban school system was asked the same question. Frankly, I feel that the work of elementary, secondary, and college teachers represents points on a continuum rather than separate enterprises. If we want teachers to join and attend our regional fall conferences, we must provide panels that meet their needs. These must be included in the regular Saturday and Sunday sessions. At the last MARAAS annual meeting, a colleague and I made presentations on pedagogy related to the teaching of the Tang Dynasty. A number of university people found our materials and approach interesting because they teach students, too. Once they come, the K-12 teachers will have their appetites whetted for the more scholarly topics. In fact, they may sign up for your courses.

Some readers may be concerned that my suggestion for

"inclusion" will compromise the scholarly ideals of AAS. However, we are in the unique position of being the single proponent of education about Asia. In many other fields, the workload is divided among organizations. For example, the American Historical Association promotes scholarship at the college level, while the National Council of Social Studies and the National Council of History Education encourage K-12 history education. Of course, a separate organization for the K-12 study of Asia could be formed. That is not the solution I would advocate when we have so much to offer each other. I hope that the regional councils find methods of attracting members from elementary and secondary schools and of looking for ways of forming meaningful partnerships. Thus, we can become a unique body of teachers of Asia K-16+.

ELLINGTON : *A larger issue is how Asianists at all levels can better promote the study of Asia in the nation's schools. What are some ways you think we can do this given the decentralized nature of American K-12 education and the fact that most school teachers have very little background in Asian studies?*

SOLOMON

The lack of background is a serious problem since teachers are now teaching about Asia. In the first issue of *Education About Asia,* Jean Johnson expressed concern that some teachers were presenting Asian societies as "timeless cultures." Lacking knowledge of the histories of Asian societies, they focused on the tea ceremony or "cultural traits" and ignored important processes of continuity and change. I have seen teachers perpetuate stereotypes. If we want to have a permanent impact on the teaching of Asia, we must go beyond the one-day workshop. Seeking to establish ongoing partnerships between university and K-12 teachers, we can find many successful models.

VETERAN TEACHERS NEED PROGRAMS that introduce them to dynamic speakers and a variety of source materials from different disciplines. They need time to engage the material through discussions. In the Columbia program described earlier, "Teaching About South Asia Through Primary Sources," we followed these seminars by developing and sharing teaching units in which we applied new concepts. I have used the materials and knowledge gained from this program continually over the past two years. In presenting this model, two problems come to mind. First, some teachers lack access to a university with dedicated Asianists. Distance learning through interactive television represents one possible solution. In the Philadelphia schools, where an extensive distance learning program exists, several languages, including Chinese and Japanese, have been successfully presented in the past few years. A second problem is the drying up of funds. When the leaders of our Columbia program submitted a similar proposal for a study of China, NEH turned them down. Perhaps private foundations are becoming a more promising source.

Another useful model is that of teaching collaboratives. During the past two years, Howard Spodek, Professor of History at Temple University, organized a partnership between high school and college teachers of World History. I was a participant. After visiting each other's classes, we compared the two levels in both content and methods. One of the positive aspects of this partnership was that both groups benefited greatly. While college teachers suggested sources and new approaches, high school teachers had demonstrated the interactive methods now being adapted at the university level. One problem that we agonized over was the lack of adequate preparation of secondary school social studies teachers. As a former history department chair, I interviewed many perspective teachers. In spite of the needs of our global society, job candidates are still presenting resumes with the bulk of the coursework in European and American history. In a recent screening of over two hundred applications, only two or three applicants had taken several courses in Asian history and religions. Having taken a hodgepodge of social science courses, many candidates lack a background in history altogether. Since the lack of adequate teacher training is the root of the problem, Asianists must address the issue. They must work to reform the teacher training programs in their own universities. I know this is messy and political, but "someone has to do it."

FINALLY, SCHOOL SYSTEMS DO RESPOND eventually to state laws. They will require education about Asia and other non-Western societies if they feel compelled to do it. Now, we are back to politics again. If we are serious about promoting the study of Asia, we must see that our state laws mandate its inclusion in the K-12 curriculum. If we expect the laws to be implemented, we should demand that teacher in-service be required as well.

ELLINGTON: *How might we more effectively use our new publication to promote teaching and learning about Asia in the nation's schools?*

SOLOMON

The first issue was impressive. Broad in scope, the issue contained articles and book reviews that would interest teachers of all levels. We have to see how K-12 teachers respond. I think they would be more likely to read the journal if it contained a section specifically directed to elementary or secondary teachers. For example, the whole language approach to teaching reading has spawned a literature-based curriculum at the elementary level. I can envision an article in which elementary-level fiction about Asia would be reviewed. Suggestions for the use of the material in the curriculum might be included. In this way, *Education About Asia* would become an important part of a K-16 approach to the teaching of Asia. ■

Lesley (far left), at the end-of-the-year party for the Humanities class.