

# COLLABORATION AND PLENTY

## Supporting Teachers' Learning (and Unlearning) about East Asia

By Kyle Greenwalt, Jennifer Pippin, and Ethan Segal

In this article, we share insights from our work as teacher educators leading National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) workshops, funded by the Freeman Foundation through Indiana University's coordinating site. Recent workshops have been on both premodern and modern East Asian history. We focus on two areas in particular: collaboration and curricular abundance. Ultimately, we argue that teacher professional development is most effective when it directly confronts trends that have marginalized teachers and teaching in US society.

**Attendees are encouraged to be active participants, their background knowledge is valued and shared, and they are surrounded by colleagues of like mind.**

Working with teachers across the K–16 spectrum, with backgrounds in social studies, language arts, and East Asian languages, we have had to embrace diverse approaches. Research on teacher learning generally holds up professional development that is school-based, instructionally focused, collaborative, and ongoing as the gold standard. As such, there are limits that a campus-based program comes up against, as many of these criteria are difficult to fully realize.

Together, we face these limitations. We strive to create a workshop environment that fosters rapport and scholarship, developing a network for teacher participants. We also draw upon our diverse strengths: Jennifer Pippin is the Outreach Coordinator of the Asian Studies Center (a US Department of Education-funded National Resource Center for all Asia for the 2014–2018 cycle), Kyle Greenwalt is a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Education, and Ethan Segal is a faculty member in the Department of History, all at Michigan State University (MSU).

### Collaboration

Both Jennifer and Kyle are licensed secondary educators who taught in high schools for some years prior to their current appointments. We have both had our fair share of professional development workshops and seminars. Like many other K–12 educators, our experiences were—all too often—dispiriting and disappointing. In most instances, those professional development sessions were either district-provided workshops or seminars we had to pay for out of pocket. Our concerns with district approaches are familiar: one-shot presentations on topics that would come and go (with little concern for sustainable follow-up). With the rise of standardized testing, Jennifer's experiences, in particular, will resonate with many current teachers: sitting through hours of district-mandated meetings that are focused on analyzing test results in an effort to improve student scores, and thus the school's score.

Examples such as these ignore topics and practices that might inspire teachers *both* to remain in the profession *and* to deepen their knowledge of the craft. The NCTA seminar on East Asia—usually held on campus during the summer—offers a different type of professional development for participants, providing an environment that is both inspiring and educational as the group delves into East Asian history. As organizers, we set out to create a distinctive type of workshop environment that promotes collaborative learning and offers opportunities for two-way interaction with disciplinary experts. At the same time, we recognize and honor the unique needs of teachers who work with different grade levels and teach subjects ranging from history and geography to literature and art history.

Anyone who has taught knows that if a teacher shows genuine respect to the students, it is more likely the students will return that respect. Teachers who come to the NCTA seminar at MSU are scholars and professionals and are treated as such—not by just one of the facilitators, but by all three. Together, we embrace our varied roles and experiences: curriculum writer, instructional coach, high school teacher, historian, university instructor, world traveler—with collective experience in K–12 literature, social studies, and second-language acquisition. In turn, attendees are encouraged to



Members of the 2018 Summer Workshop on traditional East Asia. Source: Photo courtesy of the authors.



Ethan Segal (standing) offers background content for an activity that Kyle Greenwalt (seated at front in a checkered shirt on the left) will lead. Source: Photo courtesy of the authors.

be active participants, their background knowledge is valued and shared, and they are surrounded by colleagues of like mind.

Many of those who sign up for the workshop seek to deepen their content knowledge about a region they feel ill-equipped to teach. These are individuals who find themselves teaching a world history, literature, or cultures curriculum even though they had few (if any) college courses on East Asia. Others participate in our NCTA sessions because they already have a passion for the region and find the seminar furthers inspiration for the classroom. These teachers often bring outstanding ideas for practical ways to better incorporate East Asian content into K–12 learning and so can be models for those teachers who feel lost or overwhelmed.

Once teachers arrive for the weeklong intensive seminar, they are met with an environment that fosters discussion, inquiry, and respect. They are also met with plentiful food (breakfast, lunch, and breaks) and books for them to keep on seminar topics. For the premodern workshop, we use a textbook, along with collections of short primary source excerpts that are easily adapted for classroom use. For the modern workshop, we provide (weeks ahead of time) longer books (such as Natsume Sōseki's *Botchan*, Richard Kim's *Lost Names*, and Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters*) together with links to short videos that introduce each book. Because the summer affords teachers time to read and the videos help highlight important topics and key questions, we have had interesting, productive discussions about these works.

During the workshop itself, we strive to employ a variety of instructional methods. In other words, the sessions do not consist solely of experts lecturing from the front of the room. Instead, we *process* lectures and *analyze* primary sources, images, and video clips, seeking to unearth new perspectives through experiencing discussion-based teaching methods that highlight multiple perspectives. Longer blocks of time focused on East Asian content are broken up by shorter ones devoted to introducing pedagogical approaches. In addition, we find time to work in different sorts of interest groups: by grade-level and subject-matter groups (sixth-grade world geography, seventh-grade world history I, tenth-grade English, etc.), by location (urban, suburban, and rural schools), and by career experience (new teachers, veteran teachers).

Upon completing the workshop, teachers become eligible for two stipends of \$250 each: the first is for full attendance and the second is for developing a curriculum project to be implemented within their classroom during the coming school year. These projects receive extensive feedback and are then shared through various means (group reunions, online, through building networks, etc.).

Alumni of the programs (“master teachers”) are encouraged to remain engaged with outreach efforts through the Asian Studies Center at MSU. For example, one alumnus of an NCTA seminar was invited to assist with an exchange program for high school students from Japan and Michigan



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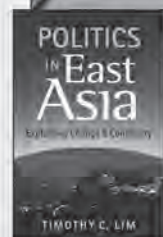
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Participants examine a replica of the Mongol Invasion Picture Scroll as part of a discussion of early medieval samurai. Source: Photo courtesy of the authors.

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focused on nuclear science, funded by a grant through the United States–Japan Foundation. This history teacher helped develop curriculum for the project and traveled with a group of Japanese and American students in Michigan, Illinois, and select prefectures in Japan. Another alumnus recently helped organize and facilitate the Taiwan Film Festival through a grant from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Chicago. Both teachers were compensated for their time, expertise, and energy—rarities in the field of K–12 education.

Of course, securing funding for workshops like these is always a challenge, especially in these budget-constrained times. MSU has been fortunate to receive generous financial support from NCTA and Title VI, but those with more modest resources could still organize a modified workshop that would be just as productive. It might require not providing teacher stipends, or perhaps not supplying food or books. If your funding source does not stipulate thirty hours of in-class interaction, then a workshop of shorter duration could be arranged. Organizers might even explore ways to have some of the content and interactions facilitated online. But offer-

ing teachers a meaningful chance to engage with colleagues and university faculty would remain at the heart of the program and still be of value to participants.

In short, the richness of the NCTA seminar at MSU lies in the collaboration of the facilitators, the rapport developed in the room once the teachers arrive, and the continued opportunities for engagement once the seminar is over.

### Curricular Abundance

“What do we need to know about East Asia?”: this question would seem to be the starting point for any deliberation on the history curriculum, whether working with children in elementary schools or adults in graduate history programs. Yet, as we will suggest in this section, it is not quite the way we have approached our work in these seminars.

Teachers working in the K–12 system in the United States are well accustomed to the language of the “need to know.” Such language aligns very well with the practice of writing curricular objectives—knowledge shorn of its historiographical and methodological supports to become an item for recall on a test. In short, public school teachers are all too familiar with a discourse of scarcity. There is seemingly never enough time nor enough resources to teach children about East Asia. Teachers might, therefore, look for the information that is most likely to appear on the test, choose methods of instruction that quickly convey that material (such as lecture), and perpetuate a mindset of scarcity.

If there is anything that differentiates our own approach to working with our K–12 colleagues in the “Teaching East Asia” workshops, then, it is our counterintuitive embrace of abundance. What does such an approach look like in practice?

For much of each day, Ethan shares with teachers more information about East Asia than they could ever possibly use. It includes more than just speaking from the lectern. He encourages and embraces teacher questions that will lead to tangents. He introduces activities, such as a debate among famous Chinese philosophers of the Eastern Zhou period, that force teachers to think carefully about and apply the ideas and information that they are encountering. He carefully monitors time and engagement, but never in ways that are obvious. His teaching is a site of plenty.

As Ethan lectures, Kyle uses Google Docs to create a shared running list of curricular resources, focusing in particular on primary documents and visual media. He also uses time each day to introduce participants to discussion-based pedagogies (such as structured academic controversies) that give teacher participants the chance to quietly study these many resources in preparation to argue with colleagues, in small groups, questions that are actually quite fun to consider: Is Confucianism a religion? Were the Mongols good for East Asia? Was modernity brought to East Asia by outside forces? After the weeklong seminar has finished and teachers have submitted their curriculum projects, Kyle reviews them, providing extensive feedback that helps teachers clarify big ideas while suggesting further resources that might be helpful.

Jennifer’s primary efforts are behind-the-scenes recruitment and organization of everything from grant reporting, books, stipends, and meals to continuing education credits through the Michigan Department of Education—all crucial to the smooth functioning of the workshops. But as a certified educator and former high school teacher herself, and someone who has lived in both China and South Korea, she also makes important contributions to discussion, offers teaching suggestions, and helps rephrase things for easier comprehension when necessary.

In closing this section, we want to again reiterate: it is not necessary to build workshops around the relatively narrow range of historical content found in most state history standards. State standards are prone to many of the same well-known faults as history textbooks. And among the more pernicious of these faults is the tendency to treat history as the “story

of nations,” where China, Japan, and Korea only ever enter into consideration as they interact with the United States. Unlearning these implicit associations about East Asian content—Japan = Matthew Perry, Korea = Douglas MacArthur, and China = Richard Nixon—requires the ability to create counternarratives of richly detailed significance. And only through free exploration of the full richness of historical inquiry is this possible.

At the same time, for faculty who might lead a professional development workshop of this type, the content and approach cannot be identical to what a professor offers undergraduates in a semester-long college class. It requires greater flexibility with more time devoted to pedagogical discussion and application at the price of leaving out some content. And it requires embracing the notion that teachers know best what will work with their students, therefore respecting their questions and decisions as fellow professional educators.

**Conclusion**

Grant-funded, university-based professional development for teachers cannot ignore the current state of public education. When public school teachers are underpaid, overworked, and undervalued, learning also entails unlearning: unlearning the belief that there is never enough time to cover East Asia in depth, that East Asian countries only matter as they interact with the United States, that there is never enough money to support interest-based professional learning, and that there is never a reason to teach apart from raising student test scores.

It also requires those of us in higher education to place greater value on outreach, which often takes a backseat to our research and college-level teaching. We have seen—particularly through reunions held in the following spring, when teachers share the ways their lesson plans actually worked in the classroom—the positive ways in which professional development workshops such as these can inspire K–12 teachers and their students alike.

Together with our colleagues in public education, we hope to reverse trends that marginalize teachers, history teaching, and diverse perspectives on global issues. It is possible through collaboration and mindsets of abundance. ■

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**ETHAN SEGAL** is Associate Professor of History at Michigan State University, where he teaches courses on everything from traditional China in world history to science fiction and Japanese film. His research explores gender, trade, and foreign relations in pre-1600 East Asia, and his first book, *Coins, Trade, and the State: Economic Growth in Early Medieval Japan*, is available from Harvard University Press (2011). He has led teacher-training workshops in California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New York, and Vermont.

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