GOING ON-LINE TO TEACH ABOUT ASIA

WITH A FOCUS ON JAPAN

By Jana S. Eaton
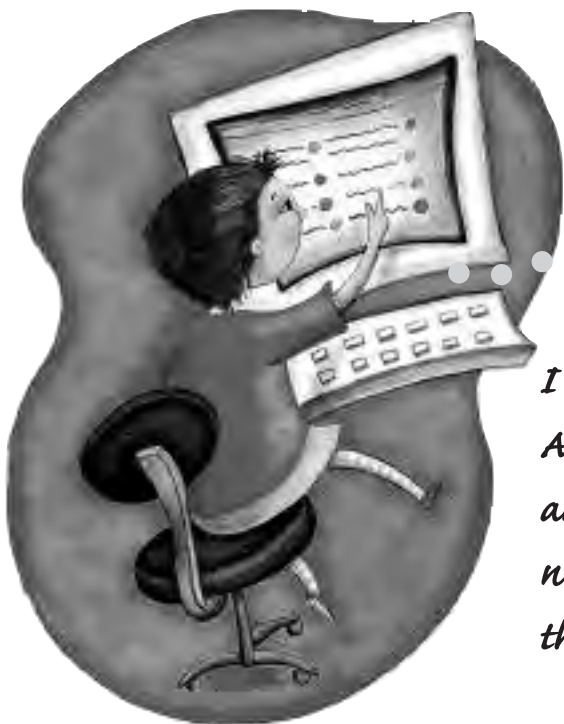
I teach Afro-Asian Cultural Studies and Advanced Placement Comparative Government and Politics at Unionville High School in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, and I'm "hooked" on the Internet.

While we have resources comparable to other schools in our region, there is a dearth of information in our library on non-Western cultures and governments. Additionally, while most secondary schools nationwide are offering college-level Advanced Placement courses, few of the libraries are provisioned to support these courses adequately; they are, after all, high school, not university, libraries. Thus, an increasing number of us are turning to on-line sources to augment the texts and meager supplemental materials that are available.

The use of technology in the social studies classroom, while still in a relatively embryonic stage, nonetheless has immense potential to revolutionize the way in which instruction is delivered and the manner in which students learn. We now have opportunities to bring virtual worlds into our classrooms which were nonexistent a decade ago, to connect with different parts of the globe almost instantaneously, and to avail ourselves of a plethora of sources previously inaccessible to us, including virtual museums, an endless array of archived documents, a wealth of foreign news sources, and an astounding number of resources about any topic imaginable.

With a focus on Japan, I will touch upon how you can employ on-line capabilities to engage your students in comparative studies, to enhance and augment your content, and to serve as the vehicle for original research and collaboration with students and faculty in schools around the globe. Finally, we will visit some exceptional Internet sources for educators teaching about Japan and discuss how these sites can be integrated into engaging, student-centered lessons within the classroom.

Jana Eaton and Cyndy Kinstler visit with students on a vacation/field trip in Kyōto.

One of our most intriguing classroom projects was one that a teacher from Akatsukayama High School in Kōbe, Japan, and I initiated—

a cross-cultural comparative gender study with high school students. Our pupils both designed surveys, which we administered to a number of students in our respective schools. The project developed after the Internet had been used in classroom lessons and students in my class had expressed an interest in communicating with students in one of the countries being studied during the course of the academic year. We searched the Net and located a school in Kōbe, Japan, with a sophisticated Web site in English, as well as Japanese. My students then took a virtual tour of their school, read eyewitness accounts of the 1995 earthquake and autobiographies of their students, and viewed their school news and projects pages. I then e-mailed the school and inquired whether there would be interest in doing a collaborative project. Teacher Shinji Masui replied that several of their English teachers were very enthusiastic about collaborating on a project.

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After conferring with our classes, we decided that a comparative gender studies project would engage the learners, enhance their research skills, and contribute to their growing knowledge of comparative cultures. A survey seemed to be the ideal vehicle by which to have the students gather information. Originally, the plan was to give one survey to both groups of students. However, it soon became apparent that questions appropriate for one culture were often inappropriate for another. For example, questions regarding sexual behavior are taboo in Japan. Furthermore, the teachers explained that most Japanese high school students neither date nor drive cars. A Japanese question that our students found perplexing was, "Are men attracted to women who wear clothing with animal cartoon characters?" Additionally, the Japanese students were interested in finding out whether women should continue to walk behind men and if they should serve the tea at work; Unionville students ruled out these questions as non-issues. My students noted that many of the questions proposed by the Japanese students were similar to ones that might have been appropriate in the U.S. in the 1960s; whether women should work outside of the home was one example.

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We then discussed, on-line and with our own classes, the differences in the surveys and problems associated with designing a common survey, after which we agreed that our students would take only the survey that they had designed but would be shown both surveys for the purpose of comparing the questions and would, of course, share their results. Because some of the questions asked by Unionville students related to sexual behavior, the Japanese teachers gave their students "edited," culturally appropriate, versions of our survey.

The students tallied the survey data and determined, with teacher guidance, which results were significant. They then drew conclusions and posted them on the Web. For example, while Unionville students did not object to either girls or boys "using bad language," the Japanese students responded that it was acceptable for the boys but not for the girls. Most students in both schools agreed that women face less job discrimination in the States than in Japan, but surprisingly, more Japanese boys

than girls surveyed identified this as a problem in Japan. Most American students agreed that both the males and females should share household chores, but once again, the percentage of Japanese male students who agreed that chores should be shared (90 percent) was significantly higher than the percentage of their female students (75 percent). This finding was certainly incongruent with actual practice in most Japanese households.

Jana Eaton, Kristen Hansen, Kazuko Mihara and Shinji Masui discuss comparative on-line gender studies projects.

We discussed the survey in terms of its strengths and shortcomings. These students had not studied statistics and were not familiar with statistical concepts such as validity or reliability. I did introduce them to some of these concepts, as well as to the idea of statistical significance, but their survey was a high school project and not intended to be a professionally polished production. I also cited an older study that indicated that Japanese responses could be quite different when the questions were asked in, and the answers given in, English: answers tended to reflect the cultural expectations of the language in which the questions are asked. Since both surveys were conducted in English, the possibility that the Japanese students might have given answers that would conform to the cultural norms of the United States was explored.

Coincidentally, the summer following this project, I was awarded a Keizai Koho Center Fellowship to study and travel in Japan. One of the highlights of my trip was the opportunity to visit the teachers in Kōbe with whom I had collaborated in developing the on-line comparative gender studies project. Here, at Akatsukayama High School, I met with English teacher Kristin Hansen and Shinji Masui, acknowledged as one of Japan's leaders in the use of educational technology. Masui had also designed one of the most sophisticated award-winning school sites on the Web. Since students were taking exams, the teachers and principal invited me to spend the morning with them. After literally hundreds of e-mail messages, it was gratifying finally to be able to associate names with faces and to experience this unique form of professional communication and growth. (Unfortunately, Shinji was transferred to another school and his Web site was removed from the Kōbe server; there was no one with sufficient skills to maintain the superior Web pages he had created. Today, he has his own Web pages at http://www.masui.com/).

In addition to the possibility of designing collaborative, cross-cultural projects using technology, there are also invaluable resources on the Internet for teaching about Japan, particularly at the pre-college level. There are Internet sites which abound in reference and research materials; others are ideal for enriching traditionally taught Japan units. Still other sites offer quality information suitable for lessons that are entirely Internet-based and optimal for classes with access to a computer lab with Internet access.

Visiting with students at Akifuchu High School in Hiroshima.

Illustration by Chuan Khoo

One of the best sources of archived documents for both secondary and college educators who are doing research is the Japan Documentation Center at our own Library of Congress (http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/jdc/). Here, you can search for abstracts of documents in their extensive collection and order full-text versions on-line, many of which are available in both English and Japanese. Also at the Library of Congress is a text-based site which details everything from the country's profile to its history (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/jptoc.html). Harvard's Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies maintains a site with many useful links to Japanese government sources, but some of these are in Japanese only. Stanford University's Guide to Japan Information Resources (http://fuji.stanford.edu/ JGUIDE/) offers a comprehensive selection of links to both domestic and Japanese news sources, as well as to politics and government sites. Links to most of Japan's major political parties and selected government documents, many of which are in English, are also located here. The Association for Asian Studies' Web site features a page entitled, "Links to Asian Studies Organizations and Asia WWW Resources" which contains an exhaustive list of links for the professional educator or researcher (http://www.aasianst.org/links.htm).

An excellent source of teaching materials for elementary through secondary levels is AskAsia, sponsored and maintained by the Asia Society (http://www.askasia.org/index.htm). This site includes lesson plans and materials for teaching about Japan, as well as annotated bibliographies. Extensive links to maps, the Japanese Constitution, historic sights, museums, the arts, and tourism may be found on the Japanese Information site: http://www.ntt.co.jp/japan/index.html. The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies (http://www.indiana.edu:80/~japan/) also contains a superb bank of educational resources for teachers at the pre-college level. Also included is a substantial list of links to Internet resources for researchers at all levels. Another source not to be missed is the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education (ERIC/ChESS) database which contains a sweeping collection of teaching and research materials (http://ericir.syr.edu/).
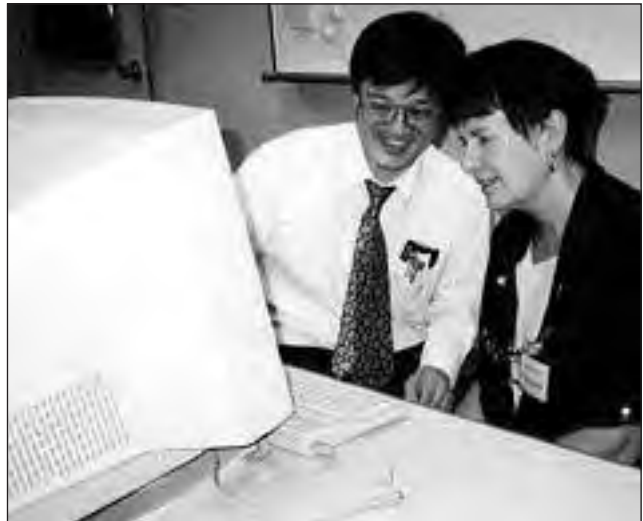
Yet another impressive Web site is the Japan Information Network which houses resources on Japanese society, culture, education and politics, plus "summaries of major trends . . . facts about each region, statistical data . . . analysis of the major issues confronting Japanese society and much more" (http://www.jinjapan.org). The site was developed in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. An outstanding compilation of links to government and politics Web resources is located at http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/8008/ and includes information on the branches of government, political parties and pressure groups. The East Asia Studies Center at Indiana University also hosts useful information for kindergarten through grade twelve educators, including lesson plans and ancillary resources (http://www.easc.indiana.edu/pages/columbia/j612a.htm). If you want to locate audio-visual resources for teaching about Japan, don't miss the Asian Education Media Service site at http://www.aems.uiuc.edu/index.las.

You can even take your classes on virtual field trips. The Virtual Museum of Traditional Japanese Arts, for example, contains magnificent galleries of fine arts, martial arts, performing arts and crafts and may be found at http://www. jinjapan.org/museum/temple/temple.html. Another splendid destination is the Kyōto National Museum with its images and accompanying text for selections from both the permanent and special exhibitions (http://www.kyohaku.go.jp/). As I write, one of the special collections features dolls from the various periods in Japanese history.

Finally, the hierarchical directories should not be overlooked. Yahoo, for example, contains a myriad of Japan sites on a wide variety of topics; in the "Arts" category; for example, there are links to bonsai, origami, Kabuki Theater, ikebana (flower arranging), and calligraphy, to mention but a few (http://dir.yahoo.com/ Regional/ Countries/Japan/).

Educators interested in creating their own Web pages to complement their classroom instruction now have many models on the Web and user-friendly, commercially available templates for Web page construction. If you are adventurous, you may want to write your own HTML programs from one of the tutorials available on the Internet. My own pages at http://www.ucf.k12.pa.us/jeaton/ were written in "raw HTML," not because I had a burning desire to learn a programming language, albeit a simple one, but because I was unaware that there were Web page programs available when I designed my site four years ago. While the layout is not as intricate (i.e. no forms or tables) as it might have been with software such as DreamWeaver or FrontPage, it is quite functional. On these pages, I maintain a "Japan Photo Gallery," which I use for District-wide, as well as classroom presentations. On the "Bookmarks" page, students can click on links to country sites, as well as to news and reference sources for their research projects. There is always an updated "Assignments" page, which absent students and parents particularly appreciate. I also have my Japan research findings and conclusions on these pages. Both parents and students frequently avail themselves of the "built-in" e-mail feature to contact me for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from student progress updates to assignment clarifications. The "What's New?" pages apprise readers of special projects and forthcoming field trips.

A computer teacher at Akifuchu High School views Eaton's Web pages.

Whether students are involved in collaborative or individual projects, Internet-based lessons in computer labs are decidedly student-centered and tend to be far more engaging than the traditional teacher-centered lecture mode of delivering instruction. They have the advantage of providing hands-on experiences in which the students are able to set the pace within instructor-designated parameters. In this setting, after crafting the lesson, the teacher serves as a mentor, or facilitator, in a discovery-based learning process, rather than as a purveyor of information. As technology becomes even more integrated into the curriculum or even replaces the lecture as the preferred mode of delivering instruction, teachers will need to acquire new sets of instructional skills. While well-designed Internet-based lessons take considerable advance planning, the focus during the lesson is on the student, with the instructor serving as a coach while students search for, interpret, evaluate, analyze and synthesize information.

Students at work in the computer lab at the elementary school attached to Ochanomizu Women's University in Toyko.

One caveat is in order for Internet neophytes: Using the Internet effectively as an educational tool requires careful advance preparation in order to avoid expending a great deal of time and energy for a minimal return. If students are conducting their own searches, they need to be thoroughly grounded in advanced search techniques using Boolean operators. (Most of the search engines have help pages which contain tutorials on advanced searching. My favorite at the moment is AltaVista, which has excellent instructions on how to do advanced searches with Boolean operators at (http://www.altavista.com/av/content/help.htm). In the alternative, educators can bookmark links for students to use in assignments, thus insuring that students are accessing pre-selected sources that have been evaluated by the instructor for reliability, credibility, and depth of coverage. There is a plethora of information on Japan on the Net; while not necessarily misleading, much of it is extremely superficial.

While some educators have expressed concern that extensive use of computers and the Internet fosters social isolation, I have not found this to be the case. When permitted to do so, my students collaborate extensively, whether in the computer lab where there are enough computers for each student, or in the library clustered around the eleven on-line computers. What I do have to watch when more than one student is on a computer is that control of the mouse is shared by each of the students on the team. I have observed a tendency for the male members of the team to control the mouse for the entire class period without intervention by the instructor. I have explained that my expectation is that all students will develop proficiency in using technology.

Using the Internet to develop meaningful, student-centered projects and to access its colossal reservoir of resources can enrich classroom content, provide material for highly engaging lessons, and serve as a mechanism for developing higher level cognitive skills as students learn to acquire and process this electronically transmitted information. Used effectively, the Net is a key which can unlock a virtual cornucopia of resources and educational possibilities. ∎

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