

How to Teach and Learn about Afghanistan: A Digital Humanities Approach Why Study Afghanistan?

By Grace Norman

We all know about Afghanistan, but how well do we understand it? Afghanistan is America's longest war, and millions of children from military families are affected by it, but only 12 percent of students can find Afghanistan on a map. The US hopes to transition from military to soft power as a way to stabilize the region and end the war, but, with so little knowledge and thinking about the region, there is little hope of finding peace unless education in and about the region becomes a higher priority, and in a hurry.

This article describes four ways to use the digital humanities approach to teach and learn about Afghanistan.¹ Many of the lessons emerged from *Homeland Afghanistan* (<http://afghanistan.asiasociety.org/>), a website created for secondary schools that explores the geopolitical and cultural heritage of the place.² The history is told through seventy-five short videos, featuring interviews with scholars, as well as hundreds of digitized archaeological finds, paintings, literary works, music, photographs, and documentary films. The history ranges from early human settlements and the development of long-distance trade (including the Silk Roads) to the cycles of peace and conquests that helped create present-day Afghanistan. Educators can find numerous pathways into the content, whether historically, thematically, or through a current events focus.

Teaching and learning about Afghanistan is not without its challenges. The Hindu Kush region (and Central Asia in general) was a meeting place of peoples, cultures, and influences in the ancient world, as well as today. Unlike China to the east, Rome to the west, or India to the south, historical records traditionally were not kept, nor are there many historical surveys of the Hindu Kush region. Much of what we know about Afghanistan comes from scattered artifacts, symbols, and oral traditions; and many of those are from foreign sources.

Investigate!

Within this challenge are opportunities. Learners can approach this area of the world as do archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists—by examining primary and secondary source evidence, raising questions, offering hypotheses, and defending their ideas.

The Hindu Kush region, and specifically its mountain passes, remains a major crossroads of the Eurasian continent. Great empires throughout history fought for control. The one who controlled this critical passage—for traders, proselytizers, and armies—in turn had great wealth and power. Its remoteness, however, meant that political boundaries were not clearly set nor necessarily known to people in villages or by migrating populations. Time and again, large-scale geopolitics operated very differently than on the ground. Many argue that this pattern, or “a new Great Game,” similar to Imperial Russia and the UK's nineteenth-century rivalry involving Afghanistan, is playing out again now. Is geography destiny? This is just one example of how examining evidence raises questions that, in turn, compel deeper investigations and critical thinking. Students can examine the same primary and secondary sources that humanities scholars use. By understanding the roots of tradition and conflict, students have better context for understanding Afghanistan today.



Homeland Afghanistan, “Geography and Destiny” theme page at <http://tiny.cc/q66ygw>.

Try these two sample lessons to show students how to use essential questions and available evidence to investigate history and draw conclusions about the region.

Is Geography Destiny?

Asia Society Website: <http://asiasociety.org/node/11825>

The early civilizations—Nile River Valley, Minoan, Indus, and the Yellow River Valley—were great centers of complex and urban cultures. We do not typically think of them as part of a global trade network, but emerging evidence questions whether long-distance trade between continents happened centuries earlier than we commonly believe. Students assume the role of archaeologist and design a museum exhibition to showcase their findings.

How Can Afghanistan Secure a Peaceful Future?

Asia Society Website: <http://asiasociety.org/node/11826>

This lesson examines what happened in Afghanistan and what led to a US-led conflict there. Students are challenged to think about what Afghanistan needs to secure a better future.

Weigh Perspectives

Individuals have their own perspectives, and nations or schools of thought may promote collective views. There is also historical perspective. Scholars like the *Homeland Afghanistan* advisors regularly question which evidence to consider.³ In the Hindu Kush region, historical texts are often in Greek, Chinese, or other languages—sometimes written centuries after the fact—and present challenges for scholars. Beyond textual evidence, historical sites or artifacts are primary sources that require historical sequencing and visual literacy to understand. Other challenges persist: Just because something survived, was it important? Was it typical? What about the availability of evidence?

Students consider these questions as they weigh perspectives provided by the evidence. Through this exercise, students learn the importance of speculation and how it plays a significant, but very different, role than factual evidence. Watch this webinar to see how you can use historical evidence to teach students to weigh perspectives.

Teach Afghanistan Using Primary Sources

Asia Society Website: <http://asiasociety.org/node/20718>

Primary Source Website: <http://primarysource.org>

Primary Source produced a training video for educators that offers practical ideas and activities on how to use primary resources (examples are from different historical periods) and how students infer and weigh meaning.

Communicate

Afghanistan has been home to diverse cultures, empires, and traditions. It is a place where an equally interconnected future will unfold. With the help of digital technologies, it is possible to learn about Afghanistan through people-to-people connections. For instance, teens—no matter where they are from—share similar interests but can learn from what makes them unique, too. Beyond personal connections, students can conduct interviews, discuss views, and otherwise ask for help in project research or implementation. In many Afghan regions, opening schools and sustaining education is a challenge. Schools that do exist may lack adequate infrastructure or funding for Internet connectivity, but several nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations have made some of these linkages possible.

Try a Digital Exchange Program

Afghanistan Youth Links *The Global Nomads Group* Website:
<http://gng.org/programs/program/youth-links>

The Global Nomads Group offers a yearlong program linking American and Afghan youth through videoconferencing, social networking, and workshops.

Advocacy or Action

After students analyze and interpret information, they are ready to adopt a position of advocacy or action. The skills required for successful participation in the world, such as responsible citizenship, innovative entrepreneurship, and active leadership, among others, may involve starting service projects, spreading knowledge or ideas, volunteering time, and so forth. Topics can come from the *Asia Society*, *Primary Source*, or *Global Nomads Group* resources linked above, or students can propose their own. Whether students work on projects to improve education in or about Afghanistan, or share ideas on how to preserve cultural heritage in times of war, or ways to support military families, topics abound, and students should follow their interests to create a project that is personal to them.

Although only 12 percent of young Americans can find Afghanistan on a map, real learning goes a lot deeper than facts and numbers. Engage your students with Afghanistan—through a humanities approach and with the help of digital tools. It will surely compel deeper understanding of the peoples, patterns, and relationships of this complex world region. ■

NOTES

1. Veronica Boix-Mansilla and Anthony Jackson, *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage with the World* (Washington: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). The four methods align to how students develop global competence, which are the knowledge and skills students need for the global knowledge economy. The definition of global competence was developed by the Asia Society and the Council of Chief State School Officers and has been adopted by the US Department of Education. Global competence aligns with the new Common Core State Standards.
2. Afghanistan is a modern country, founded in 1747. Five thousand years of history across scores of empires and dynasties share one homeland in the Hindu Kush region. Boundaries change, as do names. For clarity of language, in this project we sometimes call the Hindu Kush region “Afghanistan,” even before the political entity existed. Likewise, we refer to Iran, China, Greece, Egypt, and other places—but these terms must be taken in historical context.
3. *Homeland Afghanistan* was developed through the teachings of our academic advisory committee: Dr. Thomas Barfield, Professor of Anthropology at Boston University; Dr. Sheila Blair, Professor and the Calderwood Chair of the Fine Arts Department at Boston College; Dr. David B. Edwards, Carl W. Vogt, '58 Professor of Anthropology at Williams College; Dr. Morris Rossabi, Professor of History at City University of New York as well as Columbia University; and Dr. Lorraine Sakata, Professor Emeritus, Department of Ethnomusicology, University of California at Los Angeles.

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