

EAA Interview with Jill Fortney

Teaching About Japan at North Bennington Elementary School

An Interview with
Jill Fortney

Jill Fortney is an outstanding elementary school-teacher. Her work has been recognized by the Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College. In the following interview, Jill offers practical suggestions for fellow teachers.

Lucien: *Jill, tell our readers a bit about yourself and the school in which you teach.*

JILL: I teach sixth grade in a small, 182 pupil, K-6 school in southwestern Vermont. Basically, the classes are all self-contained with large classes being



Jill Fortney

configured into multi-age groups. North Bennington is a small community that demonstrates a great deal of support for its school and its students.

I've taught 20 years—ten years as a K-6 art teacher in Bennington, and the last ten years teaching sixth grade at North Bennington Graded School in North Bennington. In 1993 I attended a Summer

Geography Institute at the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C. That was a real turning point for me professionally. Since that time I've given numerous professional workshops within the New England region, on teaching geography, teaching about Japan, and developing learning centers. In the spring of 1997 I won an award for excellence in teaching about Japan from the Sasuga Japanese Bookstore (in Boston), the Boston Children's Museum, and the Five College Center for East Asian Studies (FCCEAS) at Smith College. In the summer of '97 I was a Fulbright-Hays Fellow and spent five weeks traveling and studying in Japan with eleven other selected educators. Kathleen Woods Masalski from FCCEAS directed the study abroad program.

Lucien: *How did you first become interested in Japan?*

JILL: In 1985, the local Rotary Club donated \$200 to each elementary school to be used to promote world understanding. The school where I was teaching art decided to focus on one country the following academic year. We chose Japan, and I offered to chair the organization committee. In January 1986 the entire student body (over 300) and all faculty (approximately 40) studied the culture, language, arts, and history of Japan for one month. It was an outstanding success and culminated in an open house attended by hundreds of parents and community members. I remained intrigued by Japan after this experience and began a personal study which is ongoing. Traveling to Japan last year was like a dream come true.

Lucien: *As you developed an interest in teaching about Japan, what individuals and/or groups assisted you in developing expertise in Japan-related content and pedagogy?*

JILL: The first two years I taught sixth grade, it was a Social Studies curriculum requirement that I teach Western Civilization. When the curriculum changed, I saw an opportunity to teach about Japan, especially since an area industry was Japanese-owned, and several families had moved in. Since I had materials from the earlier school wide study, I started from there. The Japan Society of Boston provided films, and the Japan Society of Burlington, Vermont offered a calligraphy class and held a *Matsuri* (festival) I was fortunate enough to attend. The Fleming Museum in Burlington loaned a kit on woodblock prints. But the greatest help has been the FCCEAS and Kathleen Woods Masalski located at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1995 I attended an FCCEAS summer institute about Japan held at Smith. Since that time, Kathy has been extremely generous and encouraging. The Center has an enormous number of curricular materials, kits, videos, and books about Japan, China, and Korea to loan to educators in the Northeast region.

Lucien: *Please comment on some of the major themes about Japan that you teach.*

JILL: I use a rather unique vehicle for teaching my Japan unit. Over the past ten years I have developed a learning center approach. It is a student-centered, independently-executed unit that integrates Social Studies (specifically Japan) with English, Reading, Science, Math, Art, Music, and Physical Education. Because my class is self-contained, I have an enormous amount of flexibility, and the Special Education, Speech, Remedial Reading, Library, Art, and Gym teachers all help by integrating one way or another.

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My advice would be to study extensively about the culture and the people before one starts teaching it. I'd recommend The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity by Edwin O. Reischauer . . . and viewing the video Tune in Japan: Approaching Culture Through Television

three stations: Geography, History, and Lifestyle. Each station has between five and eight tasks specific to its topic. Each station has required tasks every student must complete and several free choice tasks from which they may choose. The tasks include both traditional and contemporary Japan. The students are permitted to complete tasks in any order they wish. They have individual tasks, partner tasks, and whole class tasks. I teach a whole class task about once a week and also show select videos (some of which tie directly into specific tasks) throughout the six- to eight-week unit. The tasks vary greatly as I have tried to address multiple intelligences and different learning styles and also include the use of computers.

This year we were visited by a Japanese exchange student and

a local high school student (and former sixth grade student of mine) who spent a year living in Japan as a Rotary exchange student. We also had the pleasure of seeing a traditional Okinawan karate demonstration. In the past years the students have made origami, *raku* pottery, carp kites, and doll clothes for Children's Day and tried their hands at calligraphy. We've always finished the unit with a meal—cold *soba* noodles, hot sticky rice with *nori*, hot green tea, cold barley tea, and rice crackers. Before my school's renovation when the kitchen was still here, the students prepared sushi, tempura, soups, cucumber salad, and tea. Also during the course of the unit, I teach several Japanese phrases, the students bow in greeting, and they remove their shoes at the classroom door.

During English period they write beautiful haiku poetry. In Reading they work in partners and read novels with a Japanese theme, then retell and illustrate the story in picture book format. I've even devised a fun math lesson using Chinese-Japanese numbers! It has become a special sixth grade unit, and incoming students, on the first day of school no less, ask when we'll be studying Japan.

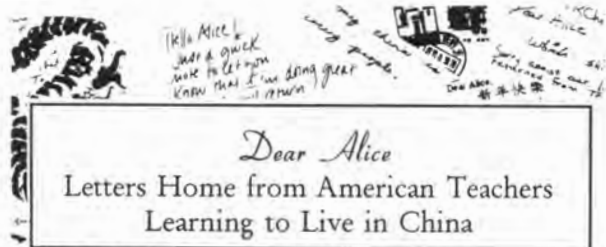
Lucien: *What are several teaching strategies and curriculum resources that you can recommend to other elementary teachers who are interested in Japan?*

JILL: Personally, I'd recommend the learning center as a means for teaching about Japan or any other culture for that matter. As far as curriculum, there are many fine resources

available. I'd suggest that teachers contact their state Geographic Alliance, look for a Japan Society in their region, contact an area university or college, check out the Internet, contact FCCEAS and, of course, continue to read *Education About Asia*.

Lucien: *One wide-spread concern of Japan specialists who work with teachers is that the latter will overemphasize traditional Japanese culture in their classroom efforts while underemphasizing the contemporary and Western aspects of Japanese culture. Any comments?*

JILL: I understand these concerns and in fact remember discussing this very topic with Kathy while in Japan. I try to stress the positive attributes Japan has to offer. I want my students to be interested enough,



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even intrigued, to learn more on their own. I try to portray Japanese traditions accurately. I also like the differences between Eastern and Western cultures and thought. That doesn't mean that contemporary issues, negative issues, especially those that affect the world, shouldn't be addressed, and I do that in my unit, but which issues to teach should be age appropriate.

Right now American culture—music, fashion, food, television, cinema, language—is a hot commodity in Japan. I think American youth need to understand that people in Japan are getting their impressions of America from the products we export. I would like to see American youth be a bit more introspective and ask themselves how they want Japan (and the rest of the world) to perceive them and their country.

By studying contemporary Japan, American students can look more closely at the global economy and America's impact on Japan's economy and vice versa. Also, with the Internet, contemporary Japan is just a key stroke away.

Lucien: *Jill, I know you traveled to Japan for the first time last year. Please share some of your impressions of the country with our readers.*

JILL: I was struck by four things: the absolute beauty of the mountains, shrines, and temples, and the presence of art in practically everything; the civility of the people everywhere at all times; the enormous number of people everywhere at all times; and the pure pleasure I derived from soaking in a deep, hot Japanese bath and eating limitless Japanese food. I was constantly impressed with the mass transit system. The school children made us feel like celebrities which was a completely different spin for us American teachers.

Lucien: *What advice would you have for other elementary teachers who are just beginning to become interested in Japan?*

JILL: My advice would be to study extensively about the culture and the people before one starts teaching it. I'd recommend *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* by Edwin O.

Reischauer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1988) and viewing the video *Tune in Japan: Approaching Culture Through Television* (New York: The Asia Society, 1995) and "Living Treasures of Japan" (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1980) for starts. Try reading, talking, and eating Japanese culture before teaching about it. I'd also caution teachers, secondary as well as elementary, to remember that they're not just teaching a unit of study, a piece of their curriculum, but about a people's story and, hopefully, their hearts.

Lucien: *What advice do you have for those of us at EAA who would like to see elementary teachers do more with Asia?*

JILL: Perhaps EAA could be a clearinghouse for information about courses and institutes (like that which I attended at Smith) offered around the country. Or better still, perhaps EAA could sponsor such an institute and bring in educators who are doing an exceptional job teaching about Asia to present workshops. The National Geo-

graphic Society took on such an endeavor when they wanted to get the word out about geography education. I'd suggest that teachers approach administrators on teaching about Asia and if that fails, get on curriculum committees and create change from the inside out. I'd also like to see secondary-level teaching deviate from the textbook lecture and go more towards an interactive mode. Even though secondary teachers may be covering Asian studies, they may not necessarily be doing it well.

Lucien: *Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with our readers, and keep up the good work! ■*

JILL A. FORTNEY, an elementary educator and teacher consultant, lives with her husband, who is a high school guidance counselor, and their 17-year-old son in southwestern Vermont. In addition to spending time in Japan, Fortney, along with her family, has camped in their tipi throughout most of the United States.

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