

## Uncovering North Korea

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It is my pleasure to have worked with SPICE in a variety of capacities. I enrolled and participated in the SPICE seminar on East Asia, I served as a presenter to that same seminar in later years, I worked as a consultant on a curriculum unit, and I have long considered myself a devoted user and fan of their classroom resources and curricula. The latest unit on North Korea is no exception. What I particularly appreciate about SPICE materials is that while they are exceptionally well-organized and easy to implement—user-friendly and accessible to a wide

range of students—they are far from “packaged” or pat.

Indeed, specialized units such as “Uncovering North Korea” are a rarity. As noted in the unit’s first lesson, “How much do we really know?” I had little exposure to Korean studies, and scant examination of the Korean War, in my own high school experience. Perhaps this is not too surprising, given how even today news coverage of the Korean peninsula gets short shrift. I teach a contemporary Asian Studies seminar with a specific focus on Japan, China, and Korea to seniors at an independent school in Oakland.

I have been covering the North Korean nuclear crisis with my students since the seminar’s inception nine years ago. My most successful exercise is a six-party round table summit simulation that asks students to represent different countries in the effort to encourage the North Koreans to abandon their nuclear weapons program. This exercise is the culmination of an extensive examination of the history and background of the Korean peninsula, the war, and uneasy armistice, the particulars of the North Korean political system, the perspectives of the North Korean citizens and state, issues of international security and arms control, and the points of view and interests of the six party participants.

The resources in this unit, “Uncovering North Korea,” will be very helpful in streamlining and focusing my lead-in to this final exercise. In particular, the formatted timeline with the US vs. North Korean ‘biases’ is a helpful reminder of the varied interests and interpretations involved in international relations. It is nice to have materials that explicitly ask students to examine an issue in a more complex and multifaceted fashion. To dismiss Kim Jong Il as a “madman,” for example, without understanding his motivation and personal history is not just superficial, but also politically unwise. The film *State of Mind*, about the North Korea mass games honoring Kim Jon Il, is also a tremendous resource in this initiative. My students are captivated by the film’s two central characters; in them, they find both common teenage connections and very acute and uncommon political commentary. The mass games are a metaphor for the larger political agenda of the state, and the movie artfully blends the personal and the general story of life in North Korea. The SPICE unit does a nice job of extracting details from the movie and connecting them to larger historical, economic, and political insights (“The Collective,” “Life in Pyongyang,” “Education,” “Families,” etc). As always, the SPICE unit approaches the

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information in varied and multi-modal ways (jigsaw discussions, personal connections, creative applications, and group activities).

Finally, I particularly like the primary sources and research resources listed throughout the unit. While SPICE handouts with summaries are good for top-line information, the primary source excerpts (e.g., preamble from the North Korean constitution) and background articles are more robust, and I appreciate the ability to send my students off for more exploration (the newspaper project, for example). I also like the foundational overview of the issue of human rights as lead-in to the prison camps and gulags in North Korea. It is admittedly hard to excerpt such tragic and painful personal stories in one page, but the varied examples do form a larger patchwork perspective of the pattern of abuse.

As many teachers do, I will likely use the lessons to varying degrees with some modifications and personal adjustments. That is the beauty of the SPICE unit—it allows for customized application of specific units, while still working together as a coherent whole. I am grateful for the opportunity to review and use this new unit. ■

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