

We are pleased to publish the following essay by 2007 United States-Japan Foundation Elgin Heinz Humanities category award winner, Alejandro (Alex) Echevarria. Alex is a humanities teacher at Rampart High School in Colorado Springs. He is a teacher in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program and teaches IB Theory of Knowledge, IB East Asian Regional History, and IB Twentieth Century History. In addition to engaging in a wide range of community and professional activities, including service as an NCTA seminar leader, Alex is the faculty sponsor of the Japan Club at his high school.



WHY PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

By Alejandro Echevarria

Comparison is the foundation of all learning; it is when, in making comparisons, we see a connection between what we know and what we don't know, that we have learned something.¹

Elgin Heinz

Something happens in the humanities classroom when the student realizes that his/her world is infinite, without borders, and that knowledge is not solely confined to a textbook. They reach the understanding that *they know*. In my classroom, understanding and gaining perspective is the essential outcome I want for them. The memorization of historical dates and trivia, knowing the state standards, and scoring “above proficient” on standardized tests pale in comparison. In fact, I think none of these really matter when it comes to what it means to truly learn. It’s similar to when Mao Zedong used the expression “Draining the pond to catch the fish” when he criticized Soviet economic planning. Too often, we rob the students of learning in order to satisfy the system.

What is Perspective?

Perspective can be approached as an anthropologist would observe a culture. Within a particular society or culture, we can be either insiders or outsiders, and participation can be active or passive. When my students read a primary source document written by, for example, Fukuzawa Yukichi, they are passive-outsiders. When they watch and question the history presented in the movie *The Last Samurai*, they are passive-insiders.² They are interpreting Japan through Tom Cruise, or in other words, through their culture and nationality. When I lead student study tours to Japan and have them mingle and talk with Japanese hipsters involved in *cosplay* at Yoyogi Park, they become active-outsiders. Getting them to become active-insiders within another culture may seem problematic. However, when we leave our homestays in our Japanese sister-city, Fujiyoshida, and some students and their families are crying, I know they have become active-insiders; their host families have accepted the student as one of their own.

Gaining Knowledge

Getting students to understand *how* they learn is one of the first steps in understanding perspective. One of my favorite perspective activities for a history class is to have them “draw history using any geometric shape.” They must be able to explain their philosophy of history as it ties in with their chosen shape. It’s amazing to see what students can develop through this activity. I have seen straight lines, circles, blobs, and heard the most fascinating beliefs about what history is. All humans order time and space from their cultural perspective and rarely think about it, let alone question if another perspective might exist. Asking them “How do you know history is constructed like this?” and always asking, “How do you know?” makes the student question their learning.

Before we begin our study of history, I warn the students that they will learn about history from different perspectives. Most students don’t know what “historiography” is, yet by the end of the school year, they are able to analyze the historical interpretation of events and, thus, to understand multiple perspectives. An excellent secondary work for understanding how we construct history is Paul Cohen’s *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*. In my classroom, we study this work and question how historical perspective and interpretation is diverse and constructed through time and place. Cohen shows the reader that the Boxer Rebellion can be constructed through three frameworks: historical narrative, as an experience, and as a mythologized past. John Dower’s *War Without Mercy* and *Embracing Defeat* provide the Japanese point of view of the war in the Pacific (1941–45) and of the Occupation of Japan (1945–52). Dower is quite remarkable in his ability to move the reader between the insider-outsider perspectives mentioned earlier.³

When I teach about the war in the Pacific in my class, we compare the American perspective with the Japanese perspective.⁴ Students can compare Japan’s dilemma of trying to find *kokutai* (national polity) through expansion in Asia, with the United States’ nineteenth century belief in Manifest Destiny in the Pacific. Students realize that when these two nations came into conflict, both sides

ESSAYS

were “right” and believed their cause was just. Although I do not absolve Japan of its role in the war, I believe this type of inquiry opens students’ minds to ethical questions in history. When we get to ethics, I believe the classroom has reached one of the higher levels of learning. By comparing the evidence and different perspectives, they begin to know. By the time we are finished, they question whether or not this war was a fight between good and evil, and whether it was a “just” war. To finish the unit, I teach the Chinese history of the war and the Chinese perspective, which is quite different from both the Japanese and US perspectives.⁵ Studying conflict from multiple perspectives allows students to analyze the ideologies and beliefs that cause war, are practiced during war, and grow out of war. This leads the students to make ethical judgments and allows them to develop empathy and compassion.

A Web site I use extensively is John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa’s, “Visualizing Cultures.”⁶ This site is masterful in presenting visual culture and offering perspective. We question whether the images are historical sources or propaganda and examine the images using the themes of modernization and nationalism. The students examine the images much the way Paul Cohen did with the Boxers: through the narrative, the experience, and the mythology. A recent controversy over visual images on this Web site is also presented to the students so that they will understand how historical images can still affect nationalism and belief in Asia today.⁷

I recommend that high school history classes take the time to read a novel. My students read Yu Hua’s *To Live* to prepare them for their International Baccalaureate exams as well as to give them a perspective of historical events as only a novel can. A novel has the ability to blur perspective because it can pull the reader in. One of

my students wrote, “*To Live* allowed me to see the impact of events on other people and how these events are interpreted, ultimately allowing me to connect with other people.” Taking an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about Asia both enriches the curriculum, and allows the students to understand how societies express their experiences. As the opening quote by Elgin Heinz states, it is the connection between the two cultures that lets us know that we have learned something.

The Learner and Perspective

I asked my students why learning about perspective in my classroom matters to them. Here’s a sample of their responses:

I gained a personal feeling toward the people and perspective of the event. It provided me with an emotional connection between the people of the past.

Knowing different perspectives can help me understand why conflicts occur.

I was able to reach my own conclusion not someone else’s. I had a chance to make my own value judgments.

Challenging and exploring conflicting perspectives allows us to have the most complete understanding of history possible.

Teachers in social studies are told that our mission is to give students a civic education and encourage them to become active members in society. I would also add that they must question, problem solve, use diplomacy, and most importantly, guide their knowledge through perspective. ■

NOTES

1. Elgin Heinz. “Teaching About Other Cultures.” *Education About Asia* 5 (2000): 2: 25.
2. The teacher needs to be aware that using *The Last Samurai* in the classroom presents many challenges. See Joan Ericson and Jim Matson’s article “Lessons of the Last Samurai” in *Education About Asia* 9 (2004): 2: 12-16. I also recommend reading Mark Ravina’s *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2004) before using the movie in the classroom.
3. The interviews with John Dower in *Education About Asia* 5 (2000): 3 and 11 (2006): 1, have incredible potential for classroom discussions. John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) and *War Without Mercy* (New York: Pantheon, 1987).
4. Most of my students have only studied the Pacific War within their US History courses, and, thus, learn it from only one perspective. Two useful sources for the Japanese perspective are *Sensō: The Japanese Remember the Pacific War* by Frank Gibney (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995) and *Japan at War: An Oral History* by Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook (New York: The New Press, 1992).
5. Many students are unaware that the “Pacific War” began in China years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. I’m astonished to find that many are not taught China’s role in the war, China’s alliance with the United States, and how China was devastated much in the way Russia was devastated by the German invasion. Many American students believe the US defeated Japan, but I open up the possibility that China defeated the main force of the Japanese army much in the way the Russians defeated the German army, allowing the allied powers to make rapid advances. The “loss” of China to the communists changed the way the US wished to interpret the war. China’s effort in the war was revised by the US during the Cold War and largely ignored.
6. John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa. “Visualizing Cultures,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005, <http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027j/menu/index11.html>.
7. The Web site contains a warning to the viewers as the images can be construed as propagandistic.

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