

A Meeting of the Minds: Learning about the Eastern Hemisphere and Creating Citizens of the World

By Kevin Sheehan and Larry Laifer

Imagine your sixth grade students enter your classroom and take out their nametags and the notes they carefully prepared for a discussion about life in the eastern hemisphere. Without any teacher direction, they sit in groups where they represent children of their own age from pre-selected nations of the eastern hemisphere. They share their perspectives about life in “their nations” and how “they got to be who they are” as eleven year olds. They share their views on current world problems and discuss influences that have shaped life in their respective countries; they even discuss the influences that will likely shape lives in their countries over the next decade.

These students are well prepared to assume the perspective of a sixth grader from the nation they were assigned because, in previous lessons, they had taken their classmates on a “bus tour” of a city in their nation, complete with information about food, religion, schooling practices, and social life. They also had the opportunity to act out key events from the modern history of their country. In addition, each group created a “human statue” (using one of the group members) that reflected influences on the life of a sixth grader in their nation. In order to complete this assignment, students needed to be active researchers who would thoroughly analyze articles on their assigned nation. Students acquired both the knowledge and desire to participate in a meaningful and relevant discussion.

Now imagine replacing these activities with a traditional, end-of-the-year, fill-in-the-bubble test on the nations of the eastern hemisphere. Which experience would better prepare our students for the world they inhabit? What do we want as the capstone experience for our elementary social studies program? In the absence of a formal state assessment in elementary social studies in our state, we have the freedom to work toward our goal of nurturing informed, involved, and caring citizens of the world. This article outlines a series of learning experiences and



assessments that we created for sixth grade students at Lockhart School in Massapequa, New York. The activities reflect what social studies educator Grant Wiggins identified decades ago as “doing the stuff of social studies.”¹

Begin with Questions

The New York State sixth grade curriculum spans history from the Neolithic Revolution to the Holocaust; it also directs teachers to cover the unique geographies, governments, economics, and histories that make up the eastern hemisphere.² In order to make such an unwieldy curriculum manageable and meaningful, teachers in Lockhart designed a learning experience in which students teach each other about life in different eastern hemisphere nations today through research projects that reveal



Students create a "human tableau" about current world events

evidence of student understanding. We began the unit with a list of questions that we believe truly informed citizens of our world today should be able to answer; students added their own questions as well. The questions were intended to pique students' interest and stimulate research. Questions included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Why do so many of our phone calls asking for technology support get answered by people in Bangalore, India?
- What happened to the nations that made up the Communist bloc after the fall of the Soviet Union?
- Is life in Russia today better or worse than it was under communism?
- What is going on in Darfur? Why are people being killed and forced into refugee camps?
- Why is life like under the Islamic theocracy in Iran?
- What effect have cell phones had on human rights and the government's policies in Tehran?
- Why are so many of our products made in China?
- Has increased production in China made life better for the Chinese people?

- How does China, which has a communist government, balance its political system with a growing worldwide economy?

Initially, most students were unable to answer these questions. Without such knowledge, students lack the background and schema to understand events that will shape their lives. The goal of this project was for students to not simply answer the above questions, but to make real world connections between economics, government, geography and their own lives. The series of learning experiences described below equipped students with the knowledge and skills to participate in the culminating Meeting of the Minds activity.

Creating a Facebook Profile

Despite the fact that the NYS sixth grade curriculum includes events in the 20th century, most teachers tend to end their coverage of historical events at the Middle Ages. What results from this is an extensive focus on early civilization. Elementary students generally leave grade six unable to correctly place on a timeline events that occurred after the Renaissance. This activity involved today's geography and current events.

Each student was assigned to a group representing a city or region within a nation: Shanghai, China; Tehran, Iran; St Petersburg, Russia; Darfur Region, Sudan; and Bangalore, India.³ In the first part of the research assignment, the teacher asked students to create a Facebook profile for a student in the city or region that included information about the economy, government, geography, and history of his or her nation. In

Figure 1. Modern History in the Eastern Hemisphere

How did geography, religion, economics, and government shape these events?

China



1. Communist Revolution
2. Tiananmen Square Protest
3. Building of the Three Gorges Dam

Iran



1. The Fall of the Shah and the Hostage Crisis
2. Oil Embargo and OPEC
3. Nuclear Issues

Sudan



1. Imperialism
2. Independence
3. Darfur Crisis

Russia



1. Communist Revolution
2. Nuclear arms race
3. Fall of Berlin Wall

India



1. Independence and Gandhi
2. Partition with Pakistan
3. Technological Revolution

order to complete this project, students needed to be Internet researchers, and so they they began their research with the *World Book Kids* online database and *Grolier Online: The New Book of Knowledge*. In addition to databases, locating appropriate virtual tours for each city or region provided students a modern feel for their city or region, while GoogleMaps and GoogleEarth provided images of their city. Many of the activities that follow were modeled on strategies developed by the Teacher's Curriculum Institute (TCI).⁴

Planning the "Bus Tour"

Students created a virtual bus tour of their region with the use of PowerPoint. The tour included a map, sites of interest, skyline views, schools, foods, transport, government buildings, commercial centers, religious houses of worship, and even snacks or a meal to have en route. The task of creating the bus tour involved a host of skills, including organizational skills (to account for all of the tasks); technological skills (to create the PowerPoint tour); geographic skills (to situate their city and its landmarks on the map); aesthetic skills (to develop the bus tickets and food for the tour); and presentation skills (to share their tour with their classmates). Because of the diverse skills needed to develop this project, this assignment allowed traditional and non-traditional learners alike the opportunity to shine.

Dramatizing History

This learning experience required students to role play, or to show iconic photographs to life to their classmates. The research students did to create their virtual bus tour provided

the geographic, economic, and political information so that students could describe what their "passengers" were seeing on the tour.

The teacher suggested events to be included on each tour, (Figure 1) as well as images associated with the historical events of their nations. Students researched the events to create skits centered on their pictures. Students began their skits by posing as the people in the image. They then made their pictures come to life by acting out what was happening. The skits were three to four minutes and brought history to life.

Students walking with Gandhi on the Salt March complained of hurt feet, but all felt the tension when Gandhi was warned by the British soldiers that if he made salt, he would face imprisonment or worse. Students watched fellow students face tanks in Tiananmen Square, tear down the Berlin Wall, and march off to refugee camps in Darfur. Not all students had the inclination to throw themselves into a role, but there was more than enough enthusiasm and drama to carry the day. The dramatizations provided the needed background for students to understand key events in the history of their region and the eastern hemisphere generally.

Designing a Human Tableau

This learning experience asked students to synthesize their regional research in order to create a human tableau, portraying a 3-dimensional still image that would depict a typical scene in the life of a sixth grader today. To create their tableaus, students first had to analyze everything they had learned to that point—the historical, geographic, economic, political, and

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Table 1—Sixth Graders from the Eastern Hemisphere: A Snapshot of Our World Today

Name _____ School _____

City _____ Country _____ Region (continent) _____

Describe your city and location in your country (bring a map).

Describe how your geography shapes your life. (Topography and climate of your city and region).

Describe how your government affects your life. (Include the type of government and any role in education played by the government.) What kinds of freedom do you have and not have?

Describe how people make their living in your city. Describe your country's economy, major exports and imports, the role of trade in your country and the standard of living in your region.

Describe the events in modern history that have most shaped your country today.

Describe the role of religion in your life. What role does it play in schooling?

Describe schooling in your country and what life in sixth grade is like.

Describe what students in your region do for fun (include sports, culture, and entertainment).

Describe what you think (and what you can research suggests) that students in your region and your country most likely feel about the United States?

Discuss which of the factors (geography, government, economics, history, and religion) most defines your life as a sixth grader?

Discuss whether the sixth graders in each of the regions are more alike or different?

If you could change any one thing in your life as a sixth grader in your country, what would it be?

Discuss whether you believe we, as citizens of the Eastern Hemisphere, can overcome our differences so that we can learn to accept and view our differences as strengths rather than division that weaken us?

THE EASTERN HEMISPHERE *from page 16*

religious influences on their region. Then, using props, each group created a tableau, posing together without speaking. We discussed how relying on a single image to represent all of the sixth graders of a region could result in stereotyping, so there would be limits to the “accuracy” of any tableau.

Students created various tableaus. Sixth graders in India were shown involved with complex technology and mathematics, while students in China seemed oppressed by domineering teachers. The group portraying Darfur depicted sixth graders at outdoor schools in refugee camps. The tableaus revealed upper-level thinking, empathy, and creativity.

The group that researched Tehran did not include a wide snapshot of the city; instead, they chose to highlight a current event: the recent beating of a protester, which had been recorded on a cell phone and broadcast to the world over the Internet.

Students in the “audience” discussed what the tableaus represented and the extent to which each “snapshot” was an accurate depiction of life today in that place, as well as whether there were other images that could have been depicted. Each group had created “an episodic memory” of their region that may remain with them for years to come.⁵

Meeting of the Minds

This was the essential question on the board that greeted students on the morning of their meeting of the minds: “Can the nations of the eastern hemisphere work with each other to create a world with peace, prosperity, and human rights for all?” Students assumed the role of a sixth grader from the region as they studied and worked in groups to discuss the influences on life in their country and to answer the essential question. We provided students with a series of sub-questions to help frame their discussions (TABLE 1).

Students were also asked to write about what had the greatest influence on life in their region. This assignment resulted in powerful writing because students were motivated by personal conviction and experiential learning. Despite being consistently bombarded with world news that is often pessimistic, students responses were surprisingly positive when asked if the nations of the eastern hemisphere would be able to work out their differences to create a better world. The students all represented a different perspective, and their responses were unique, and often touching.

One student in particular captured the sentiment of many others when she said, “We may never agree on everything, but we can respect each other’s differences.” Another student suggested, “We made a Constitution for the world where a nation will still run itself with no world leader, but human rights will be guaranteed for all.” The teacher informed the class that this young man’s suggestion sounded a lot like the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Another student suggested, “Although we are all different in some ways, we are alike in more ways than we are different. What we must do is learn to not let our differences affect our attitudes towards each other.” Students’ writing revealed a worldview that was formulated from their research and discussion.

Self Motivation

The Meetings of the Minds conversations were a highlight of the project. Students shared their unique stories without any direction from the teacher. Students’ writing revealed that their self-directed conversations allowed them to identify similarities and differences among their regions. One student commented, “Although our meeting showed me the powerful effect of religion on sixth graders in Tehran, Darfur, and Bangalore, we all agreed that the issue of religion was probably more important to our parents than it was to us as citizens of a 21st-century eastern hemisphere.”

Without having formal teacher-directed instruction on the effects of colonialism, many students uncovered the idea that ethnic problems often arose upon the departure of colonial powers. One student wrote, “Our problems in Darfur really started when we became independent, but the skit on India showed us that the same thing happened when England left India.” Much of the students’ writing centered on their own profile, but the question of “whether we can work out our differences” constantly led students to connect with students from different regions. What emerged in students’ writing was a stark difference between our views on education in America and the intensity with which education is approached in much of the eastern hemisphere. One student noted, “In Bangalore and in Shanghai, too, students take school much more seriously than we do in the United States.” Differences were often highlighted more than similarities, but most students concluded that sixth graders around the world, despite their major differences, are more alike than different.

Listening

Perhaps students’ responses leaned toward optimism about the future because they discovered one of the essential skills for the 21st century: thoughtful and informed conversation. Moving beyond texting and Facebook, students discovered that the first step in creating a world that supports all children is listening to one another. Students who engage in research and conversation about distant places may well learn both to respect differences and even to see them as positive.

Throughout the process, the motivating factor for the students was the nature of the work itself. Phillip Schlechty, president of the Center for Leadership in School Reform, proposes that the current disengagement of students may be attributed more to the nature of the work that we assign than to outside factors. He contends that if we seek authentic learners, motivated by the task itself, we are going to have to alter the work we give to students.⁶ This project brings to life the idea that the work we assign can be the motivator.

Can the citizens of different nations work with each other to create a world with peace, prosperity, and human rights for all? These conversations, these meetings of the mind, have the potential to nurture understanding among the next generation, perhaps resulting in a real world answer of “yes.”⁷

Notes

1. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2nd ed 2005).
2. New York State Education Department, *Social Studies Resource Guide* (Albany, NY: NYSED, 1997).
3. The assignments and templates discussed in this article may be found at our webpage, www.sheehansocialstudies.com/52322.html, under the heading “Grade Six.”
4. Bert Bower and Steve Lobbell, *Social Studies Alive: Engaging Diverse Learners in the Elementary Education Classroom* (Palo Alto, CA: TCI, 2005).
5. Pat Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice* (Upper Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001).
6. Philip C. Schlechty, *Working on the Work: An Action Plan for Teachers, Principals and Superintendents* (San Francisco: CA: Josey Bass, 2002).
7. We are currently working to enlist sixth graders from different countries in the eastern hemisphere to hold a truly authentic meeting of the minds with our students via Skype. We hope that our sixth graders will then be able to re-examine their earlier work about the hemisphere and assess its accuracy in light of new data from sixth grade students in those countries and—more importantly—have a meaningful conversation with children on the other side of the world.

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