I have, hanging above my desk in a suburban high school in central Utah, a 20” × 24” black-and-white photograph of the World Trade Center towers. It’s at the back of the room where I can stare at it and count to ten every time a student comment or behavior leads me to question what the heck—as Utahns say—I’m doing here.

The photograph was taken from the base of the towers looking up—the same angle from which I watched the second commercial airliner fly into the north building. By the time I emerged from the south tower’s lobby and looked up, my friends on the eighty-third floor were probably already dead.

For six months following the attacks I battled depression and guilt. I didn’t care that I had lost my job; I never really fit in on Wall Street, anyway. Prior to my banking experience, I had traveled, lived and worked abroad, attended graduate school, and commenced an academic career. But when recurring medical problems forced me to get a “real job” to cover expenses, I abandoned education. I turned to corporate finance because I couldn’t afford to teach.

The building in which I worked was made inaccessible by the collapse of the towers and our headquarters was destroyed, so my co-workers and I worked out of a satellite office until we could return to our own. When we did—wearing surgical masks to block out the stench and making our way past National Guard troops and piles of debris—we were told to sell off our portfolios and that we were out of work. That night, one of my co-workers committed suicide. Another moved to Texas and was shot in a carjacking the weekend of her arrival. I knew I could no longer afford not to teach.

Moving On: Becoming a Teacher

The events of 9/11, Todd’s suicide, and Amina’s carjacking were preventable, not by tighter security measures at airports or stricter immigration laws but through education. Education is about learning to live in a world community, about communicating and questioning and listening. This I know; so I packed up my daughter, moved to Utah, and embarked on the most frightening journey of all: I became a high school English teacher.

I fumbled through my first year, staring curiously at my sophomores and attempting to picture them as boardroom executives—future CEOs now with iPods and skateboards, mooning each other across the room. Of 180 students, seven of them had read the Declaration of Independence beyond the oft-quoted second paragraph, and not one of them could identify the king to whom it was addressed; yet they could all name the American Idol finalists from the previous year. I’d bite my lips until they bled and practically prostrate myself in front of my photo of the towers at the end of every day. What was I doing?

The patron saint of English teachers must have heard my cries, because at the end of my first year, my department chair approached me about designing a new class for seniors: World Literature. Hallelujah, I could see the light!
Time Travel and Global Travel via World Literature

I immediately set about redecorating my classroom: a collage of ripped-up maps covering the entire east wall; Tibetan prayer flags above the whiteboard; posters of the Dalai Lama, Mahatmas Gandhi, and a nameless young man standing in front of a line of tanks; African fertility statues; twenty-three Coke bottles in various languages and scripts; Indian puppets; Thai batiks; travel photos; and above the door the word 
\textit{silence}, in bold lettering, with a bright red slash through it.

Then I started planning our trip. I designed the course like a journey, complete with passports and entry visas to various destinations. We would visit certain countries together as a class, and the students could visit other destinations for their self-designed homework: first quarter in Asia, second quarter in India and the Middle East, third quarter in Africa and the Pacific Islands, and fourth quarter in Central and South America. (Europe and the United Kingdom are covered in eleventh grade.)

Our first stop in Asia was Japan, where we read John Hersey’s \textit{Hiroshima} and chapters from Iris Chang’s \textit{The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II}. We argued whether killing thousands of Japanese civilians was justified, considering the number the Imperial Army had raped and killed in China and Korea. The students had never heard of Nanking or Comfort Women prior to our reading, and many of them began to question whether I thought I was a history teacher.

In China we learned about Confucianism and the students compiled a classroom Tao. With the help of Jung Chang’s \textit{Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China}, they researched twentieth-century Chinese history—warlords, communism, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cult of Mao—and marveled at the transmission of ideas. When I popped in Yimou Zhang’s \textit{To Live}, I thought they were all going to groan to death when they saw the subtitles, but by the time the credits rolled in Chinese, half the students were bawling.

We followed the movie with a personal narrative in which the students defined for themselves what it means “to live”; suddenly the class took off.

Opportunities for Critical Thinking

The day after they handed in their narratives, I took the students to an empty classroom, around which I had hung dozens of photographs of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Beneath the photographs I had translated the Chinese government’s official explanations of the photographs and had hung blank butcher paper on which the students could record their reactions to what they saw. They wandered around the room in complete silence for about an hour, trying to piece together events. Then I sat them down and we talked about it—about what they thought.

Once they had it figured out, I told them the Chinese students’ version of events—the version the American media fed us—and offered alternative explanations to the photos. We critically analyzed the photographs to reveal discrepancies between what was written and what was shown, and the students got mad. At me. They were furious that I had lied to them, and they didn’t know what to believe.


“I don’t know,” I responded. “I wasn’t there.” They were mad at me for days after that. They would come into my room before and after school and stare at the poster of the young man in front of the tanks, and they finally started making the connection: This is, in fact, an English class! English is a language; we use language to communicate ideas; history and culture are the exchange of ideas; language is history is culture is power. Since then, I haven’t been accused of trying to be a history teacher.

Their assignment after that was a reflective paper on voice. “See these students?” I asked, holding up a photo of Tiananmen Square. “See that kid in front of the tanks? All he wants to do is say something. All he wants is for someone to listen to what he has to say. You have a voice. What are you going to say?” The students hunched over their notebooks and began writing, feverishly, in their journals.

abuse. Marching band students should receive PE credit. Our city needs a skate park. Get us out of Iraq. We need to stay in Iraq.

From China, we moved on to Cambodia and read JoAn D. Criddle’s To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family, a memoir of Teeda Butt Mam’s life in and escape from the Killing Fields. We discussed why reading is so often a crime punishable by death—why Paolo Freire was imprisoned in Brazil and why libraries are burned and the literate are killed when oppressive regimes rise to power.

“So, we should be thankful you let us read?” asked Whitney, connecting reading to thinking and democracy. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

One day I asked them, “When foreigners break laws in America, should they be punished based on our justice system or their own? Speeding? Illegal drugs? Rape or murder?” We discussed the sixteen-year-old American high school student caned for vandalizing cars in Singapore.

Risks and Rewards of Discussing Religion

When we hit India and the Middle East, we shifted our focus from politics to faith and spent two months reading scriptures. We memorized selections from the Vedas and learned about Tibetan sky burials. We read from Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha and listened to the Dalai Lama’s speech on compassion. And I told them how, as a Christian, I never learned to pray until I spent a week in silence in a Tibetan monastery in the Himalayas.

Being in the heart of Mormon country, I was worried about talking the Middle East; if I was going to get fired, this would be the unit for sure. We started with a quiz on the Holy Books, on which I presented verses about Noah, Adam, Abraham, and Christ; the students had to decide which book I was citing. Every verse was from the Qur’an, and my objective was clear within moments.

We discussed the common origins of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, drawing pedigree charts on the whiteboard and comparing Garden of Eden and flood stories. I introduced religious archetypes, such as the prophet, and we made posters of Muhammad, Moses, Luke Skywalker, and Joseph Smith.

Things began to get personal as the students tried to distinguish between religion and culture—where hijab, honor killings, and fanatic pilots fit in—but after critically interpreting the local culture for a couple of days, they stopped pointing fingers. Then we visited a mosque, and the imam told the girls they had to stand behind the boys to pray; we never came to a consensus on that one.

Students spoke openly of their prejudices, and I told them that for months after September 11, I refused to get into a taxi if I saw that the driver was Middle Eastern. I read from my personal journal and told them how hard it was for me to overcome that bitterness, but that I eventually did.

Tomi’s reaction was the greatest. When we visited the mosque, he couldn’t get past the imam’s accent and “those weird clothes that he wore.” Then he remembered that when he moved to the United States from Samoa eight years ago, he couldn’t speak English either. No one could understand him, and other kids had made fun of his hair and accent and clothes. “Man, I can’t believe I laughed at that guy,” he said, shaking his head and smiling.

With Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, we immersed ourselves in nineteenth-century Iboland, and the most conservative in the group drew parallels to Iraq. We traveled to the Sundance Film Festival, where we screened Christopher Dillon Quinn’s God Grew Tired of Us, and students who had never heard of the “lost boys” suddenly had opinions on colonialism, apartheid, genocide, and diamond mines. We compiled school kits for orphanages in Ethiopia and South Africa before moving south of our border for Guevera, García Márquez, Danticat, and Neruda. Then we made our way into the United States with Tijuana border narratives.

Students with More Global Perspectives

Despite the course’s unpredictability, we had a fabulous journey during our first year of World Literature, and I look forward to improving the course this year. Students talk of joining the Peace Corps, of becoming doctors so they can wander through Africa administering polio vaccinations, of climbing Mount Everest and riding horses in Mongolia.
Aside from what we do in class, the students design their homework each semester according to the geographical region we are visiting. They write reviews of foreign films and ethnic restaurants, read extra books, write research papers and article abstracts, and attend community and university lectures and events. As long as it fits the geographical region, they are free to explore anything they want.

After learning about Chinese foot binding, Britnee prepared a presentation titled “Aching for Beauty,” in which she explored the painful side of beauty in various cultures. My mathematician, Colby, taught us how to use an abacus, and Taylor taught us how to follow a recipe for Thai curry. Jessica and Lindsay performed an African dance while Travis played the drums. Cal and Shad researched poaching in Rwanda, and my future doctors have researched AIDS education and epidemics in Third World countries. My future Alan Greenspan taught us about exchange rates, and Brady is researching gay rights in South Africa. Jessica and Lindsay performed an African dance while Travis played the drums. Cal and Shad researched poaching in Rwanda, and my future doctors have researched AIDS education and epidemics in Third World countries. My future Alan Greenspan taught us about exchange rates, and Brady is researching gay rights in South Africa. 

Beyond Tolerance: Curiosity, Inclusion, and Communication

Will my students be globally competent and competitive when they graduate? Will 9/11 happen again? I don’t know. But I find that when I look at the photograph above my desk, I’m no longer lamenting. I am proud of what I’m learning in my classroom. I am proud of what students are teaching me about living in our post-9/11 democracy. I am proud that they’re finding their voices and that I am rediscovering mine.

Underneath my photo of the towers I have another sign, another word with a deep red slash through it. The word is tolerance, and it’s a word we don’t say in my classroom.

I tolerate my neighbor’s dog barking at 2:00 a.m. even though I’d rather pop it between the eyes with a pellet gun. I tolerate students drinking soda in my classroom even though I’d prefer they didn’t. No, I don’t encourage tolerance in my classroom. I encourage, instead, curiosity and inclusion. I want students to find and embrace others, not merely to tolerate them. I have a responsibility to my friends who died on September 11 to model that embrace, to teach communication, inclusion, curiosity, and questioning. I could do nothing for them on that horrible day, but I am doing something now.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Students learn about a time and place and then present information on a selected topic in Cook’s world literature class. The ReadWriteThink lesson plan “Designing Museum Exhibits for The Grapes of Wrath: A Multigenre Project” (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=892) asks students to participate in similar activities from a time in American history. This idea can be reframed to have students look at periods in world history.