DRAFT VERSION

Please write to the following email with any questions or comments:

studentsforstudents.uschina@gmail.com

Supporting

International Inquiry, Holistic Language Development and Student Engagement in Real Time Learning Environments Online

With Teaching Strategies for:

Building Personalized, Meaningful and Fun Learning Groups Online

Supporting Students' International Curiosity, Inquiry and Understanding

Supporting Students' Holistic Language Development and Interdisciplinary Learning

Teaching, Unit Design and Writing by:

Devon Wilson, Codi Caton, Tanya Kant, Sarah Koehler and Maxwell Smith

October 2020

Chapter 6
A Long Walk to Water International Inquiry Curriculum: Building Global Competencies

Written by Codi Caton

Going Global: My three-year journey to the International Inquiry Curriculum

As an English teacher in rural Ethiopia, I spent every morning slopping through the mud to reach a tiny classroom with cracked desks and a single, warped chalkboard. Tenth-grade students huddled together, rapidly copying the information on the board and practicing a short speaking exercise with me before grabbing their machetes and jerrycans from under their desks and rushing off to work on the farms. At home, mud was still on my mind, with my mud walls, mud floor, and a muddy compound that stained all the chickens' feathers. While trying to clean the mud off of everything, I'd sit with my neighbors as they roasted coffee for us to sip as the sun went down.

Living in Konda, a banana tree-covered village in the Keffa region of southern Ethiopia, allowed me a kind of deep engagement that would forever change how I approach transcultural teaching and learning. Before arriving, I was well acquainted with Ethiopia's long reign as the world's original producer of coffee and one of its top exporters. But there was no way to fully understand the importance of coffee until I had consumed countless tiny cups under the hum of Amharic gossip. I was awoken every morning to sit around the coals with my host family as my newly assigned sister Misret roasted the beans. We would chew on dried barley and repeat the same conversation topics we had for months: the weather, school, family back home. After lunch I'd duck under a grass roof to drink another tiny cup or two with fellow teachers, each of us competing to pay for each other. Again, after dinner and the day's responsibilities finished, I carried my tired body back into my host family's home for another cup, reviewing the day and rocking baby Tsunikal on my knee.

After a year of these thrice daily coffee ceremonies it started to hit me how important this routine was to the people and culture. For Ethiopia, coffee is culture. It's the time of day to connect with those around you, whether that's your boisterous family teasing each other or a stranger discussing politics. Mothers and daughters treat guests with bread and popcorn while the smoke of burnt coffee beans lifts into your lungs. You take a moment to look out at the sky and remember that life is not contained in those seven hours of work. Beyond all the daily benefits of pausing life to share a cup, coffee is a form of national unity.

Ethiopia is an incredibly diverse nation, with 90 ethnic groups and an estimated 83 languages, ranging across a landscape twice the size of Texas. Over the past two centuries, Ethiopia has

fought off colonization and struggled to unify its many peoples under a single flag. Conflict between ethnically charged political groups has been a staple in the country, constantly challenging the unity of a country often regarded as "a symbol of African independence."[2]. In a country where state borders are defined by ethnic background and the prevailing language can seem to change every thirty kilometers, coffee imitates the sun as it pulls everyone into its orbit. Whether walking by the orange and pink hues of an Oromo mosque or the earthen domes of a Tigray church, there is always a woman under a blue tarp selling tiny porcelain cups of coffee for a few cents.

Throughout my almost three years in Ethiopia as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I learned more about its culture, people, mindset, and livelihood than I could ever try to communicate to loved ones at home. Yet, when I returned home to the United States, I found myself bombarded with simple questions that tried to neatly put a bow on my experience. Some of these questions came from a lack of knowing what else to ask, such as "How was Africa?" Others were fueled by misconceptions from popular media, from "So everyone there was poor?" to "Did you see lions?!"

As an Assistant Teacher in my hometown of Lee's Summit, Missouri, my students were equally enamored and confused by my experience. They wanted to ask questions but felt that they knew too little about Ethiopia (or Africa) to ask. After strong encouragement from students, I made a slideshow and spent two full classes discussing the cultural differences between America and Ethiopia. It was the most energized I had seen the class, especially some of the lowest-performing students. They asked about food, religion, and, of course, dating. We discussed some of the complexities of race and Ethiopian views on the US. I left the class enthralled with the sheer curiosity my students exhibited, but also dismayed at how little students had been taught about the world and their abilities to talk about other cultures and traditions. These students wanted to be global citizens but hadn't been given the tools.

I still had these thoughts crumbling around my brain when I met Devon Wilson, the founder and CEO of Students for Students, during my first semester as a master's student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Students for Students offered an opportunity to work with Chinese students, a group I had previously no experience with, and the challenge of adapting salient lessons to an online environment. I joined the team excited to experiment and hone global citizenship pedagogy that seemed so elusive with my previous students. Working with Chinese students to slowly investigate another culture and promote the kind of deep understanding that I gleaned in Ethiopia felt like the kind of transformative learning opportunity that we educators so often strive to create.

[2] Ethiopia Country Profile - BBC https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13349398

After reading through several materials, we decided to focus a class on South Sudan and the novel *A Long Walk to Water*. I have since facilitated several semesters worth of courses with Students for Students and have had the joy of walking through this curriculum three times in the past year.

In this chapter, I share the aims and design of the curriculum, positive growth, and challenges in executing the lessons in this International Inquiry Unit focused on South Sudan.

Unit Summary:

This nine-week curriculum aims to expand students' understanding of South Sudan using Linda Sue Park's novel *A Long Walk to Water* as a base resource. *A Long Walk to Water*, based on the true story of Salva Dut, follows the life of Salva after he is orphaned in the Second Sudanese Civil War. As rebels ransack and viciously murder most of the town while Salva is in school, he flees alone into the forest. Salva must then follow a group of other Dinka (the local ethnic group) as they escape violence and start a new nomadic life. Throughout the novel, Salva encounters several travesties, yet continues to seek safety while also helping others.

Alongside Salva's struggles, the reader learns about Nya, a young Nuer girl who walks several miles every day to carry water for her family. Through the eyes of Salva and Nya, the author captures the struggles of a country divided and the human spirit's will for survival.

Unit Overview

Walking Through Conflict:
Exploring South Sudanese Culture, Refugee Crisis', and Literature Analysis
Book: *A Long Walk to Water*
(9 Lessons – 90 Minutes each)

Homework for 3-week semester:

- Approx. 2 chapters of reading per night (45 minutes)
- Some additional tasks as assigned
- Class 2: Presentation on different indigenous groups in South Sudan
- Class 3: The Theme of Your Life drawing and writing activity
- Class 4: Writing about Character Motivation and Empathy Exercise
- Class 9: Color, Symbol, Image thinking routine and final reflections

<u>By the end of this unit:</u>

a. Students will investigate different ethnic and cultural groups of South Sudan, with an aim to understand and empathize with different groups from the 1980s to today
b. Students will embrace the complexity of different race/ethnic/religious relations and conflict in Sudan, while considering how this relates to other parts of the world
c. Students will explore the themes of hope and what it means to give
d. Students will make claims as to why characters make decisions, using text from the book to support their ideas
e. Students will consider the different gender roles in South Sudan
f. Students will look at symbols throughout *A Long Walk to Water* and interpret meanings based off the text, logical reasoning, and intuition

Broad Learning Goals:
As with all of our units, Students for Students hopes this unit will:

1. Strengthen students' language confidence through an application based approach--improving their speaking, listening, writing, and reading abilities in English.

2. Improve students' critical thinking skills through providing students opportunities to question, draw comparisons, and reason with evidence.

Classes:
1. **Chapter 1-2:** What is Culture?
2. **Chapters 3-4:** What does it mean to explore a story?
3. **Chapters 5-6:** What is a theme?
4. **Chapters 7-8:** Evaluating Characters Decisions and South Sudan History
5. **Chapters 9-10:** Gender in South Sudan
6. **Chapters 11-12:** Theme Assessment and the Life of Refugees
7. **Chapters 13-14:** Symbols
8. **Chapters 15-16:** What does it mean to give?
9. **Chapters 17-18:** Wrapping up our Learning

Part 1: Designing the International Inquiry Unit

A Long Walk to Water follows a young boy during the Sudanese civil war as he travels across South Sudan to reach Ethiopia and later Kenya, looking for his lost family and finding a home in refugee settlements. Considering South Sudan and Ethiopia neighbor each other and share

some of the ethnic groups represented in the novel, I thought this would allow me to share insights with students on living in the region without becoming the teacher with all the answers. Instead, my intent was for the teacher and students to take on the role of mutual learners as we plunged into the intricacies of South Sudan.

Unit Design

The unit was specifically designed to be conducted in online Zoom meetings with Chinese high school ESL students, though the format and activities are easily transferable for various audiences and in-person learning.

While drafting the unit, I again thought back to those students in my hometown who had shown intrigue in global topics yet an absence of skills in discussing global topics and little access to other world views. Why were students only able to see the surface level of another culture and not able to engage meaningfully with global topics? I didn't realize it then, but I was dealing with the same questions and objectives outlined in Teaching for Global Competence, as referenced in Chapter 2.

I wanted students to dig deeper than reporting on a country's population and geographical location. In this class, students should have learning moments on par with my Ethiopian experience: the experience of immersing oneself within a culture. I wanted students to leave class with critical thinking skills along with authentic takeaways similar to seeing coffee as not just an export but a cultural glue bridging identities. Teaching for Global Competence provided

a framework on how to achieve this deeper learning as I drafted the objectives for the curriculum.

Curriculum Goals
Students will investigate different ethnic and cultural groups of South Sudan, with an aim to understand and empathize with different groups from the 1980s to today *(Invite deep engagements)*
Students will embrace the complexity of different race/ethnic/religious relations and conflict in Sudan, while considering how this relates to other parts of the world (*Embody local and global connections*)
Students will make claims as to why characters make decisions, using text from the book to support their ideas (Invite disciplinary and interdisciplinary grounding)

With these Global Competency goals in mind, the rest of the curriculum design was influenced by the dichotomy of what I hoped students would think *with* and think *about*. The philosophy and routines explained further below derive from *Making Thinking Visible (Ritchhart, 2011)*..

Thinking about	**Thinking with**
The content students are expected to interact with and remember.	The lenses and critical thinking routines students use to analyze and interact with content.
Examples: Dates and key players in The American Revolutionary War	Examples: Identifying how key players affected each other in the American Revolutionary War; asking questions about the war's effect on the global community
Main characters and settings in *The Great Gatsby*	The various lenses used to analyze *The Great Gatsby*; ability to use evidence to support interpretations of the novel

Too many of our education structures prioritize the sending and receiving of information: we teach students about the Revolutionary War so that they can fill in the correct bubble answering the year that it started on a standardized test. As Ritchhart explains, educators should be focused on both what students think *about* and what they think *with*; in other words, what lenses are students using to analyze different topics, or "what kinds of thinking do you value and want to promote in your classroom?" (*Making Thinking Visible,* 5) While students are encouraged to learn as much as possible about South Sudan, they are more so encouraged to see perspectives considering gender, race, and economic conditions, while also practicing critical academic and real-world skills. For example, in the second class, students are asked to do research on a specific ethnic group in South Sudan and prepare a short presentation. These presentations focus on the ethnic group's beliefs and traditions, common culinary practices, art, etc. Students complete this project using the Think-Puzzle-Explore thinking routine (Ritchhart, 2011). This routine promotes scaffolded critical thinking: students must first reflect on their background knowledge (what they think they know about the topic), then ask themselves what puzzles or curiosities they have - or where there might be holes in their understanding, and finally they generate ideas on how they can learn more. On top of flexing these *thinking with* muscles (questioning, uncovering the complexity of topics), they are honing 21st century skills (Reimers, 2016), such as speaking and giving feedback as they present and interact with peers. Students are also deeply engaged with the content and *thinking about* South Sudan as they learn concrete information about various cultures including the traditions, values, and religion of the Dinka, Nuer, and Zande.

As students progress through the book, we venture to perceive South Sudanese culture, historical events, and the novel through different lenses. Much of this is driven by discussion, but students also complete research, presentations, and other work outside of class that help to synthesize learning and develop interdisciplinary skills. In the fifth week we focus primarily on how gender is portrayed, analyzing what we notice from the book, what we find from other sources, and how this compares to our own culture's gender identities and norms. Later in the unit, we discuss Salva's experience as a refugee and similarities with the current refugee crisis. We take this opportunity to examine videos that show perspectives from refugees as they ask for assistance throughout Europe and from governments who are steadfast in their position to prioritize their citizens over refugees. These topics are not always easy to discuss, especially for second language learners, but through carefully scaffolded thinking routines and deep engagement, growth in language and critical thinking skills has been evident in each class.

Part 2: Implementing the Unit and Analyzing Student Experiences

Positive Growth

Tray (all students' names have been changed) is a Chinese middle schooler who doesn't know how to not smile and answers every "How are you?" with "I'm happy today because...". He is the ideal example of a student who can exhibit incredible growth in an International Inquiry course because, like many students, Tray hasn't had much exposure to other cultures and histories. When I asked him on the first day of class to describe what he knows about South Sudan or Africa, he responded that the people "are all poor because they don't know how to grow rice." I include this not to mock or belittle Tray, but to highlight the lack of global understanding with which many students enter class.

Throughout the course, Tray expanded upon his knowledge of South Sudan while also practicing critical thinking skills such as conducting research, uncovering complexity, and considering different viewpoints. When Tray presented on the Nuer tribe in South Sudan, he noted a long history of the importance of cattle, which was even used as currency. On his own volition, Tray then explained that this reliance on cattle was due to an often harsh and dry environment and that when people went hungry it was mostly due to droughts.

During a discussion on gender, he claimed that boys and girls in South Sudan have vastly different lives, but that gender differences in China were negligible. Another student respectfully challenged this idea, noting the remnants of practices such as foot-binding, parents' obsession with birthing boys, and the gender income gap. Tray wasn't convinced. He gleamed a warm-hearted smile and claimed that boys and girls are the same.

At this crucial learning moment, I realized that it was imperative that I resist the constant tug as an educator to put an answer in the student's ear. It would have been easy to tell Tray that, well, males and females clearly do not live within the same cultural structure. But inquiry-based learning and visible thinking routines are not designed to give answers and dictate correct opinions; they are created to challenge everyone to think critically.

I took this opportunity to push the conversation further. We spent the next 20 minutes mapping out what we think a South Sudanese boy does each hour of the day based on our knowledge from the book and previous research, and then did the same for a South Sudanese girl and a Chinese boy and girl. What time does a young South Sudanese girl wake up, and what does she do after breakfast? What does the average Chinese boy do once he gets home from school? This conversation challenged all of us to put ourselves in another person's shoes, resulting in everyone stretching their empathy muscles and Tray changing his course of thought. He later reflected that he assumed girls and boys had similar experiences because he

had been taught to treat everyone equally and genuinely wanted everyone to be equal, but that it was more complicated than that: him wanting it to be true didn't mean it was true. Tray had started to move from seeing everything through solely the lens of a young Chinese boy, to a more empathetic and critical thinking global citizen - a monumental learning moment.

Tray was not the only student to experience major learning moments. Jenny also started to build a more complex understanding of how gender is portrayed in China and across the world, thus sparking a deep desire to be a part of the conversation. She now mentions how she wants her future work to help break social stigmas against Chinese girls. Zhong discovered that he often looked at conflicts with a natural inclination to find someone to blame. As an example, he mentioned how easy it is to blame Nazi Germany for World War II, but that the conflict in the book is much more complex with many intertwining factors. Following this reflection, I pushed Zhong to consider how we might be missing some complexity in the story of how World War II started, such as Germany's recovery from World War I, offering us a chance to further explore the topic. These reflections are not uncommon for 12 to 15-year-old students in our explorations, though they have the ring of university-level learning. The International Inquiry Unit gives students the much-needed time, differing viewpoints, and scaffolded routines to drastically mature in their thinking.

Challenges

While student growth is visible in every class, there are always challenges in practicing such wide-ranged and nuanced skills. In the exploration of *A Long Walk to Water*, most of the challenges result from a limited understanding of conflict and a lack of academic materials on South Sudan.

First, the book is incredibly heart-wrenching. Salva is orphaned as a young boy, forced to walk miles each day to escape violence, and is subjected to devastating loss. Based on the true story of Salva Dut, the novel shows the real-life consequences of war, which can be emotionally exhausting for anyone, especially younger students. Asking young students to read and learn about a disastrous civil war should be taken extremely seriously, and educators should design stop gaps to ensure that all students are emotionally supported during and after class. In my classes, I've attempted to account for these challenges by spending some extra time during our one-on-one meetings to inspect how the content is affecting students and their mood. On days that are extra-sad and difficult, we end class with some South Sudanese music and giggle as we all try to sing along.

Additionally, we strive to point out to students the immense beauty and value in the culture that thrived during and after conflict. While atrocities are common in the book, we can also look at the shared meals and communal living emphasized in the novel. Soldiers kill and pillage,

but there is immense hope in Salva's dedication in leading hundreds of refugee boys to safety and providing safe drinking water to villages.

Second, discussing conflict with younger students can be challenging not only because of its emotional toll, but also due to its immense complexity. While the novel highlights the centuries-old feud between the Dinka and Nuer tribes, the thrust of the story focuses on the brutal Second Sudanese Civil War, a conflict that lasted from 1983-2005, often believed to be a continuation of the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972), and escalated (at least partly) due to religious differences and the government's quest for oil. Like all civil wars, there is not one clean and easy answer for its cause, the differing sides' prerogatives, or its result.

Obviously, it was much more complex and nuanced than can be described in a few sentences. Students in middle or high school may struggle to embrace this complexity while they are trying to learn about the country and conflict, but also may inaccurately lay blame to certain parties. In one class, a student strongly believed that the Dinka and Nuer feuds made up the prime conflict in the Second Sudanese Civil War. To challenge these misconceptions, I assigned students a research project to further analyze the conflict. Students were instructed to come back to class with quotes or direct evidence to discuss the causes and parties of the Second Sudanese Civil War. As students shared their findings, we used a Connect-Extend-Challenge thinking routine (useful for activating pre-existing knowledge and considering new take-aways). I invited them to consider how our learning "connected" with our exploration from the book and in what ways it "extended" or "challenged" our understanding of the book. This allowed me to push students beyond these misconceptions without handing them any answers. In the end, we want students to come to their own conclusions, but to do so using solid reasoning and evidence.

Finally, exploring South Sudan's culture and context outside of the book can be challenging due to the lack of free resources. South Sudan is a young country, having gained independence in 2011, and most resources available concern the antiquated Sudan nation state. The fledgling nation has a relatively small presence in global consciousness and media. While this exemplifies the dire need of curriculum on South Sudan, it can be challenging to find resources in different modes (visual, auditory, etc) for students to broaden their learning.

The End of Class and the Beginning of Wonder

Despite the numerous challenges, the process of reading Salva's story and weaving through the intricacies of South Sudan is always a rich and meaningful experience. At the end of the unit, we practice a simple routine where students and teacher reflect on how our thinking has changed since the beginning of the exploration. Using the prompt "I used to think _____. Now I think _____." We share the major breakthroughs in our learning. Every semester I am amazed at the deep level of reflection shown in the concluding class. Students

note their markedly more nuanced view of South Sudanese, comment on their shifting and complicated views of war, or express a rejuvenated interest in reading.

Throughout the various reflections, students are consistently looking closer to the core of their thinking and learning journey. Students don't leave class with just the ability to report to parents the size, population, and major exports of South Sudan. Rather, students finish the course with a transformed position on how conflict starts, why poverty exists in many contexts, the responsibility of countries to host refugees, new reflections on their gender identity within their own country, and countless other complex positions.

I've had to come to terms with the fact that no nine-week course will create the change in thought and values the way that Ethiopia left its fingerprints all over my consciousness. Instead, the International Inquiry Units push students to shed their skin of simplified and locally bound thinking and start to see the colors of the world through critical lenses. Students should leave with a fresh sense of wonder and consciousness for the planet and all its people, pulling them closer to lifelong learning.

Those endless coffee rituals in Ethiopia were not valuable simply because I left with observations. Sitting for hours with my host family, watching the sunset over acacias while learning jokes in Amharic lifted me to a plane of constant fascination. Surrounded by darkness and the deep shadows of trees, only flimsy solar lamps lit our smiles as we drank yet another tiny porcelain cup of coffee. In the darkness it was easier to realize how far removed this world was from my last, yet how comfortable I had grown with my new family. Baby Tsinukal pawed at me to lift her into the air. Misret grinned with every mispronounced word I attempted. The tiny village of Konda was a world unto itself, and I couldn't conceive of how many pockets of culture, family, and pure life just like this one are glowing across the planet. I plan on soaking up these gleaming moments, and I hope students do too.