

DRAFT VERSION

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

[studentsforstudents.uschina@gmail.com](mailto: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



*“The urgency to educate all students to become global citizens calls for innovative curricula that can support new ways of teaching and learning. These curricula must also provide all students with effective opportunities to develop the dispositions, knowledge and capabilities necessary to understand the world in which they live, to make sense of the way in which globalization shapes their lives and to be good stewards of and contributors to the (United Nations) Sustainable Development Goals.”*

-Fernando Reimers  
Director of the International Education Policy program  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Chapter 2

### Designing International Inquiry Units

Written by Devon Wilson

In 2005, I read *The Kite Runner* in my sophomore high school history class. I enjoyed the book, was moved by the characters and story, but failed to make the connection between the piece and modern-day Afghanistan. At the end, I still had little to no knowledge of the broader context and came away with no routes for feeling empowered to explore it further. Conversely, the same year I had the opportunity to take an interdisciplinary class where we studied English and History together. Being able to view the historical contexts in relation to the books we were reading made both the history and literature come alive. I still remember reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and many connections remain vivid in my mind – the relation to the youth experience around World War I, how similar the experience must’ve been for German and British soldiers alike, and the ultimate tragedy and waste that resulted from “the Great War”.

In both school-based and out of school educational experiences, students have too few opportunities to go in-depth with exploring other countries and cultures around the world. In cases where they do have opportunities to read about other contexts, students often fail to have educational opportunities and support to connect that knowledge to larger trends, topics, questions, and budding curiosities.

#### ***Introducing the Overall Design and Aim of International Inquiry Units:***

A small group of four students and their teacher enter one by one into the online chat room. Rather than jumping immediately into the lesson for the day, the group of students, each at least 1000 miles from each other, check-in about how life has been in their respective contexts: things happening at school, in their local communities, news stories that have caught the groups’ attention with room for pictures, short videos or unexpected topics. The teacher knows each student in the group well, and after hours of deep discussion and thinking together, it seems strange that no one in this group has ever met in person. In one particular semester, a group met once a week for 90 minutes, investigating a unit titled, “Exploring Indian Culture and History.” This unit was designed using *Swami and Friends* as a core text, written by R. K.

Narayan about a fictional village that was meant to be representative of life in many parts of India in the 1920's and 1930's.

In one lesson, Murali (a curriculum designer in our program) wanted students to make connections between the way the fictional village in the story was protesting British occupation by burning British factory produced clothing and the larger historical context in India at the time. In the chapter students read:

The evening's program closed with a bonfire of foreign cloth. It was already dark. Suddenly the darkness was lit up by a red glare. A fire was lighted. A couple of boys wearing Gandhi caps went around begging people to burn their foreign cloth. Coats and caps and upper cloth came whizzing through the air and fell with a thud into the fire, which purred and crackled and rose high thickening the air with smoke and a burnt smell. People moved about like dim shadows in the red glare. Swaminathan was watching the scene with little shivers of joy going down his spine. Somebody asked him: 'Young man, do you want our country to remain in eternal slavery?'

'No, no,' Swaminathan replied.

'But you are wearing a foreign cap.'

Swaminathan quailed with shame. 'Oh, I didn't notice' he said and removing his cap flung it into the fire with a feeling that he was saving the country.  
(Narayan, 1935)

Humorously in the story, Swaminathan's mother later at home asks him where his cap is, revealing that it was actually domestic homespun Khaddar, rather than the Lancashire cloth that the group was protesting. Before class, students were asked to read this chapter and then research further the reasons in which the characters in the story chose to protest the wearing of Lancashire and Manchester cloth and the role that this cloth played in international trade and the British occupation. During class, while reviewing the pieces that students had found, teachers introduced additional pieces of writing on the Salt March and played a short documentary on Gandhi's role during this period. In examining and discussing these different pieces, students were asked to consider connections between the book *Swami and Friends* and other historical contexts, how the new resources introduced extended their thinking, and what questions emerged from examining these new resources?

Murali chose to center a unit around this book because, despite its age (first published in 1935), there are many aspects that he views have been reflective of his youth and life in rural India today. The book itself offers a whole range of experiences and topics in India, both those that are topical and bring nuance to historical reviews of pre-independence India and caste-based beliefs. Additional topics include Swami's everyday life and experience – such as his joy and respect for Indian Cricket and the unique dynamics within Swami's joint-family structure. Murali shares,

“[This unit], is not just aiming at providing reading skills, but also reading skills as a means to expose students to different cultures and different worlds. . . . As a teacher the first and foremost thing will be to provide a safe space for the children to actually nurture their curiosity – I see a teacher as someone not who can provide all the answers, but someone who can travel along with the students in their journey of curiosity – at the end of a day it becomes a collective learning experience where each one is learning.”

### ***Student Impact from Taking Part in International Inquiry Units***

Teachers in the Students for Students program observe students who participate in International Inquiry Units becoming more active learners within our world. Through interviews, one-on-one meetings, and strong ties to students and parents, we have observed a myriad of student benefits, including:

- Continuing to read additional texts at the end of a unit
- Learning new languages that relate to contexts explored
- Reading the news more proactively
- Showing increased interest in international topics
- Following up with different people to hear a variety of views on topics
- Expressing their ideas more proactively with increasing confidence and creativity (both in terms of uniqueness of ideas and use of language)
- Developing their voice and abilities (and grades) as writers
- Developing an understanding and confidence of who they are in relation to local and global themes being explored

### **Key Elements of International Inquiries Units Defined**

At the core of the International Inquiry Unit is an attempt to break the cycle of viewing a book as an isolated event. Too often do classes engage with a text to discuss its plot points and characters without embracing the culture, history, power dynamics, and various other elements that surround the book. Instead of treating a book as a single story with one viewpoint, these units utilize various other resources and interdisciplinary topics to dig deeper into a narrative, thus supporting a deeper understanding of a single culture or context.

Through these units, students discuss and explore meaningful and often subjective themes, consider connections between different contexts around the world and throughout history and better understand various perspectives in the process.

**International Inquiry Units: sustained explorations of a single culture or context designed to support students' authentic intercultural understanding and thinking skills, to aid them in becoming lifelong proactive international inquirers.**

### **Key Elements of International Inquiry Units**

#### **Proactive Inquiry, Contextualization and Thinking**

International Inquiry Units are designed to help teachers and students shift from being passive recipients of international content to taking part in **proactive inquiry** (proactively thinking about, investigating and connecting with the context being explored). This method often utilizes a “flipped classroom” approach where students are expected to read, research, consider and write before the classroom meeting. Then, during our meeting, students share and discuss their findings and thoughts that emerge, and the teacher introduces additional provocations during strategic moments, challenging students to think deeper about the contexts that they are studying.

The introduction of additional provocations from the teacher and student aligns with an effort to **contextualize the text** (consistently weave in a variety of resources that add depth, meaning, and increased nuance to the text and context being studied). International Inquiry Units typically select one book as a central resource that is read and discussed over time by students, with additional resources weaved in throughout the learning experience.

Throughout the learning experiences, teachers and students utilize thinking routines and other methods to cultivate **inquiry-focused thinking skills**. Specifically, we consistently seek to give students the opportunity to take perspectives, raise questions, make connections and reason with evidence.

#### **Deep, Varied and Interdisciplinary learning**

International Inquiry Units target “**deeper learning**”, involving sustained explorations of a single country or culture (in some cases exploring 1-2 countries or cultures if they are intertwined in some way). Students are expected to go deeper in following their curiosities with one project sourcing from the book or context being explored, which typically takes the form of a piece of art or research essay. As understanding another culture does not come from a single lecture, book, or memorization of a set of facts and figures, but rather develops as a network of understandings, experiences and information; such an approach supports **multiple paths to learning** and understanding around topics. International Inquiry Units create room for different ideas and interpretations rather than lecturing from cleanly procured PowerPoint and expecting the students to instantly think and understand as the teacher does about the topic. Along these paths, students are consistently encouraged to use evidence to support their takeaways and point of view. Units typically develop in an **interdisciplinary manner**, involving learning opportunities in more than one subject over time.

#### **Personal, Socratic and Fun**

Learning experiences in International Inquiry Units utilize **small-scale personalized learning environments** (3-5 students per group) to increase individual speaking time for language learners, and support student's holistic language development. We seek to both give students time to think about the topics of inquiry and the thoughts of others in the group, but to also share thinking actively with others in the group. Within our learning groups, we hope each student will feel valued, recognized, and known. Through the course, we hope that teachers can also open up about themselves, share personal experiences and thoughts in key moments, and take part in the enjoyment and challenges that can come from learning about a new context.

### **Just the Beginning:**

International Inquiry Units emphasize that like traveling to another country, we will not understand everything about the context from our initial exploration. With each visit (learning experience related to that context), our continuous **lifelong inquiry**, we are developing a deeper understanding over time. At the end of every unit, students are invited to consider how their understandings have shifted from our recent inquiry and what they are curious to explore next.

How these elements can be realized over the course of an international inquiry unit will be explored through the cases and culture building chapters in this book and will be touched upon in the design process below.

In planning for international inquiry units, ideally, the educator can invite people who are “locals” of a context to collaborate and provide key input as to what topics and themes present authentic explorations and learning opportunities or even to lead the design of the unit when possible. The units should seek to incorporate elements that give students opportunities to explore the different views of others around this context (beyond any one person offering input or perspective on the context).

### **A Note on Online Learning Environments and Language Learning Classes**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Students for Students program and International Inquiry Units were designed with a central goal of seeking to create more engaging and motivating learning experiences for online learners and teachers alike. In our studies in Technology, Innovation, and Education classes at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), it became clear that more money and tech did not necessarily equate to better learning experiences. The elements of learning we emphasize (described above) would be the same whether we were leading International Inquiry Units in person rather than online. In fact, in envisioning our learning groups, an early goal became for them to feel as personal and effective as a high-quality in person learning experience. Thus, an unofficial motto for our program became, “Low Tech, Big Heart”, placing emphasis on teacher-student relations and student-to-student engagement in class. On the technology side, these classes require a stable internet connection, shared access to a group video chat program (such as Zoom or Google Hangouts) and a device (computer, phone or tablet) to conduct research on after class; the

primary non-technological requirement is to have a caring educator with an inquisitive mindset facilitating the group.

In designing the program to aid language learners, the team was inspired by our collective teaching experiences across the world and the many learners we encountered. We all noticed that, in general, many students had high levels of comprehension but little confidence, motivation, and oral proficiency. We realized that many of our students had numerous hours a week of more traditional language classes (centered around expanding vocabulary, learning grammar patterns, etc) and relatively few opportunities to authentically use English through reading engaging texts, discussion, and critical writing.

In line with research that suggests that integrating ESL learners into normal track classes is ultimately far better for their learning and growth than staying purely in a language learning track (*Uccelli*), we place emphasis on the application of the language in internationally focused high quality English Language Arts, interdisciplinary learning experiences (with opportunities to infuse discussion, reading and writing practice).

### **Designing International Inquiry Units:**

The design of International Inquiry Units takes inspiration from Project Zero (a research organization at the Harvard Graduate School of Education) ideas related to Global Competence (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), *Teaching for Understanding* (Wiske et. al, 1998) and *Making Thinking Visible* (Ritchhart 2011).<sup>1</sup> The methodologies and theories in each of these projects were developed through rigorous action-based research, seeking to consistently support and adapt recommendations through class-based experiences and close examinations of students' growth, and have proved helpful in supporting our efforts to promote student understanding, thinking skills, and global competency. In the following sections of our design, certain elements and theories of these programs are woven in and examined.

Below, we will introduce a few principles that will help shed light on our design process:

1. Selecting Meaningful Topics, Goals, and Key Text
2. Considering the Types of Thinking That Should Be Central Within the Exploration
3. Designing the Lessons Based Upon the Goals, Themes, and Outline

### **1. Selecting Meaningful Topics, Goals, and Key Texts**

In *Teaching Educating for Global Competence*, Boix-Mansilla & Jackson (2011) reinterpret Project Zero's Teaching for Understanding Framework (Wiske et. al, 1998) in the context of Global Learning. They write, "Educators committed to delivering quality instruction that prepares students effectively to understand and act on issues of global significance tend to think carefully about how to ensure that their instruction yields deep understanding."

---

<sup>1</sup> Aside from my (Devon Wilson's) role as a teacher and founder of the Students for Students program described here in this book, over the last 4 years, I have worked as a researcher and project coordinator on the Interdisciplinary and Global Studies Project at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.



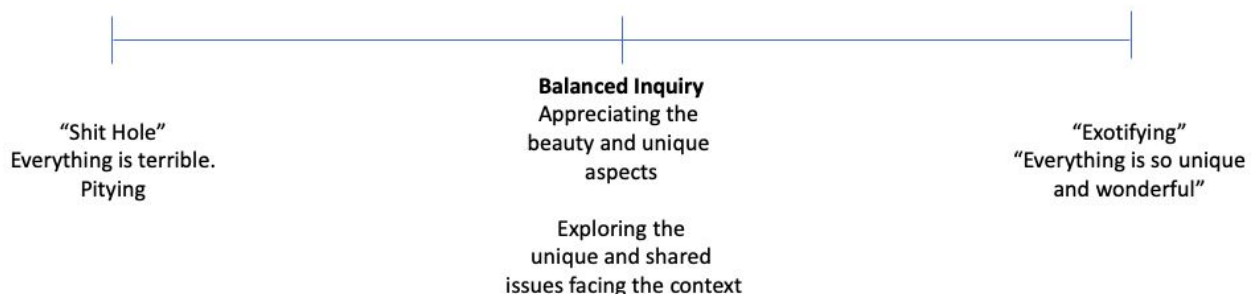


First, they prompt educators to consider “What topics matter most to teach?” While deciding what to teach may be the most important and controversial decision in education, Boix-Mansilla and Jackson offer three factors to guide teachers in developing topics which we have found helpful in designing topics for exploration:

- Invite deep engagement
- Embody local and global connections
- Invite disciplinary and interdisciplinary grounding.

**a. Invite Deep Engagement and Associated Learning Goals:**

It is typically not hard to recall the excitement that one feels during the first opportunity to visit a new region or country: that desire to explore a place where the lifestyle, thoughts and ideologies feel so intriguing and unique, yet so similar at times. It seems that as humans, there is a natural excitement and increased engagement that comes with learning about other places. Yet in this age, it’s often hard to walk a fine line, so as educators we’re not perpetuating a “shit hole” narrative (Trump’s infamous term for referring to certain countries i.e, everything is an issue and terrible in these locations), while not exotifying these locations (i.e., viewing everything as so neat and foreign, and failing to see the commonalities or modernity of certain aspects). If those two terms were placed as polar-opposites, our approach to international inquiry could perhaps be seen as trying to find a balance in the middle - inquiring with the intention to highlight the positives and fascinating aspects of a culture and context, while also exploring the regional specific and shared issues facing a region, inviting students to research these areas, and develop nuanced opinions with supporting evidence.



In the case of collaborating with an educator who is from a culture or context that we will explore through the course of the unit, we often begin our analysis by considering the following questions:

- “What do I hope they might take away, both in terms of important current and historical events, as well as the joys, beauties, and wisdom within that culture?” (This question can help in selecting the book and corresponding resources that relate to ideas raised in authentic ways.)
- “How do foreigners often view my culture and context – how can we explore and avoid misconceptions?”
- “What is a key resource or text that can help students in developing those takeaways? (See footnote #1 for notes on selecting texts that match an appropriate reading level)

In the case that someone who is not a “local” to a context is designing an international inquiry unit, it is highly recommended to speak to any contact from that culture and discuss these questions. In our experience, this was highly beneficial to our design and exploration of themes, and in many cases helped us select a different book that was often richer than what we initially found online (e.g. *Swami and Friends*). The response of people “local” or highly familiar with the context, will hopefully positively influence a research deep dive into a diverse set of resources that can contribute to developing the topics associated goals within the unit. These resources could include highly rated books (Goodreads & libraries), documentaries and news from credible sources. For classroom educators, the resource gathering and planning processes described in this chapter may be helpful in selecting a book and designing a unit if such flexibility is provided in your classroom, otherwise may be used to deepen students’ international inquiry around a required text/unit.

All too often teachers shy away from international explorations worrying that their lack of international experience makes them unqualified to explore international topics with students. We would encourage these teachers that if they adopt a mindset of respectful curiosity, consistently seek out diverse authentic resources related to contexts/topics being explored, avoid simplification of the context and emphasize the importance of continuous inquiry, they too can develop authentic international units that invite deep engagement from students.

While conducting preliminary research about a coming international inquiry, it can be useful to draft goals for what we hope students will take away from the international inquiry unit.

**Picture of Practice:**

In designing a unit, crafted to guide students in “Exploring Indian Culture and History”, Murali Mallikarjunan picked out the following five learning goals for his unit. He hoped that students would have learning opportunities to:

-Gain exposure to the pre-Independence rural India, which is similar in many ways to the current rural settings.

- Get a feeling of the schooling system that existed almost a century back and the evolutions herewith.
- Get a sneak peak into India's freedom struggle and relate to their own freedom movements.
- Get a taste of cricket and all the excitement around it
- Empathize and reflect on the various emotions of anger, fear, comradeship, challenge, courage.

In line with these developing goals, Murali selected to use the book *Swami and Friends* as a central text and resource to examine in the unit.

Since our classes are very discussion centered, we seek to balance depth with freshness of topics; therefore, within a book, we look for central themes every few chapters that connect to meaningful explorations in relation to the country and culture from an interdisciplinary sense, and switch the theme of focus every one to two classes. Clarifying and developing these themes can also help in planning opportunities for inquiry, for students to go out and conduct research and seek additional perspectives in relation to the key themes in the book, further contextualizing the text in the process.

In looking for balance between his goals and flow of the book, Murali separated the book into the following 9 topics.

Unit	Objectives	Chapter #	Chapters from the book
1	School and Making Friends	1	Monday Morning
		2	Rajam and Mani
		3	Swami's Grandmother
		4	What is a Tail?
2	Family	5	Father's Room
		6	A Friend in need
		7	A New Arrival
3	Examination	8	Before the Examinations
		9	School Breaks Up
4	Summer Holidays & Native games	10	The Coachman's Son
5	Freedom Struggle	11	In Father's Presence
6	Cricket	12	Broken Panes
		13	The M.C.C
7	Coping with Pressure	14	Granny Shows Her Ignorance
		15	Before the Match
8	History	16	Swami Disappears
		17	The Day of the Match
9	Exploring Modern India	18	The Return
		19	Parting Present

Students are invited to consider which area/sub-topic of the culture or context piqued their interests and curiosities, and later in the unit, are asked to take part in a “capstone project”

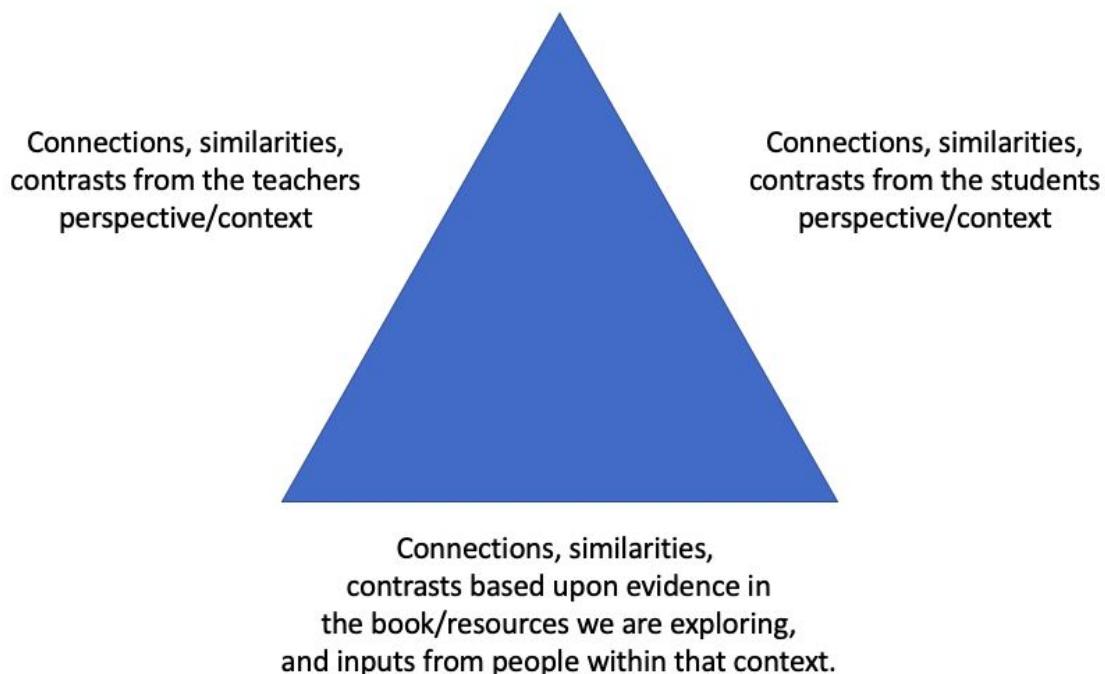
where they go further in engaging, conducting research and/or creating art related to that topic.

### **b. Embody Local and Global Connections**

A central piece to many research projects related to fostering Global Competence and Global Citizenship mention the importance of students viewing one's own context as connected to the larger world – begin to see the “systems” and “interrelated” nature of the world we live in. (Reimers, Boix Mansilla, OOEL)

In International Inquiry Units, opportunities to make connections to the context of focus keep students from viewing that context and inquiry as being about “something happening over there with very little relevance to my life”, to “seeing the stories and explorations as being a part of an interconnected world, part of a bigger story”.

In our initial two years of exploration, many of our teachers were from the US with experience living and working in other countries or different contexts, many of our students were from China (some of them living in other countries such as New Zealand, Australia or the US), and the books and topics that we sought to explore in depth were based in locations outside of the US & China. As our teacher Max Smith shared, in our initial year, we adopted a triangular approach. In exploring themes and topics within our units, we consider the perspective and experience of those raised in the book and related resources, we consider connections, similarities and contrasts to student's contexts and home cultures, and teachers share about connections with contexts in the US or other contexts they are familiar with.



Such comparisons and connection making can support students in recognizing their own perspectives. In the way that the teacher guides this exploration, we seek to do so in a way that

is not othering, but rather often drawing upon moments that highlight similarities, tricky subjective offerings, etc. It is our hope as well to show that in certain instances, experiences and perspectives in a context are complex and varied.

### **Picture of Practice**

In discussing the family structure of Swami's family and the joint family structure common in India, Murali's unit invites students to consider and discuss:

Q: How is this similar or different to the family system in China (or in a culture you are familiar with)?

Q: For you personally, what do you hope your family structure will be like in the future?

Q: Who benefits most from a joint family system?

Q: Do we see any elements of this in Swami's family?

Q: Any advice for what makes a joint/collective family work?

In discussing a folktale raised in the story about the hellish treatment in the past life for those who harbored enmity, students were asked to consider:

Q: Are there any stories like that in Chinese culture about people who are bad/have unfavorable habits?

In discussing a situation where characters in the book take an exam that decides whether they would be held back or allowed to move forward, students reviewed the modern day Indian No Detention Policy (no holding back grades) vs the Singaporean Middle School Entrance Examination that decides the advancement opportunities provided for students, before considering:

Which system do you think is the best for Mani?

Which system do you think is best for the students in general?

Throughout the learning experience, students were given opportunities to raise and discuss connections to their own lives and culture, and teachers often engaged as participants sharing perspectives and thoughts in relation to contexts they were familiar with.

### **c. Invite Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Grounding**

"We discuss different topics and it's really helpful when you can hear others' thoughts, you can also improve your different subjects, for example, English, Biology, History . . ."

-10<sup>th</sup> grade student's description of participating in International Inquiry Units

As referenced in the start of this chapter, strong interdisciplinary connections (relating to more than one subject/discipline) aid in making lasting connections and develop a deeper and more flexible understanding of topics (as I found from my positive experience reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* in high school).

In each of our International Inquiry Units, we universally look for opportunities to explore the **history** around topics or phenomena that are raised. For example, in Trevor Noah's *Born A Crime* (adapted for young readers version), Noah describes his mom's experience living illegally in segregated areas of Johannesburg in the 1970's and 1980's. Such a narrative provides a great

opportunity for students to share what they notice, think, and wonder about the context, and to research such inquiries further in relation to South African history and the context of Apartheid in Johannesburg during that time period.

Otherwise, the interdisciplinary nature of units often may source from the nature of the book. *What the Moon Saw* involves the narrative of a traditional healer in Mexico, and in parallel to the medical narrative, we had the opportunity to explore the presence and our understanding of various **medical practices** and healthy customs/habits across cultures. *My Life with Chimpanzees*, a youth friendly autobiography written by Jane Goodall, provides many opportunities to explore **biological systems**, and different natural elements through the guidance of the famed “ethnologist.” Students were invited to conduct their own ethnological observation, trying to better learn the language of a plant or animal. The **music** referenced throughout the book *Dunger*, based in New Zealand, gave an opportunity to explore the music of different time periods referenced, and discuss our interpretations and feelings in relation to the music. Our exploration of Fairy Tales and Story writing provided opportunities to incorporate “**drama**” and play-based representations of our stories, acting out stories and developing creative expansions of fairy-tales (improv based elements of certain units are described in further detail in Chapter 8. Teachers in our program observed that these interdisciplinary entry points provided both opportunities for authentic learning – and often moments of the highest engagement amongst students.

## **2. Considering the Types of Thinking That Should Be Central to the Exploration**

International Inquiry Units are designed to help teachers and students shift from being passive recipients of international content, to engaging in **proactive inquiry - proactively thinking about, investigating, and connecting with the context being explored**. In seeking to promote student-centered, thinking-centered classrooms, it is important to consider at a broader level what types of thinking should be emphasized in the unit. Specifically, our program consistently seeks to cultivate thinking skills relating to perspective taking, questioning, connection-making, and reasoning with evidence, among others. Thinking Routines (Ritchhart, 2011) and Global Thinking Routines (Boix-Mansilla, 2016) provide useful “models for students of what it means to engage with ideas, to think, and to learn. In doing so, we dispel the myth that learning is just a matter of committing the information in the textbook to one’s memory. School no longer is about the “quick right answer” but about the ongoing mental work of understanding new ideas and information.”(Ritchhart, 2011) Such routines can be especially useful in promoting thinking and discussion for students who may be more used to classroom environments around providing definitive answers rather than collectively exploring and discussing content. In the following chapter, we highlight five thinking routines that we often use in order to support thinking-centered online learning environments and cultivate students' thinking skills relating to perspective-taking, questioning, connection-making, and reasoning with evidence.

## **3. Designing the Lessons Based Upon the Goals, Themes, and Outline**

Once an educator has conducted a deep dive into resources available in exploring the context, identified the central and sub-topics and goals, interdisciplinary opportunities, and types of

thinking that one hopes to explore in the unit, one is ready to formalize the content-based goals and thinking goals – what students will take away from the unit. With these goals in mind, we can begin to develop lesson outlines, envisioning what students will do to learn. We hope that rather than a rigid curriculum where students are led step by step about how they should come to view the context, the curriculum should be fairly flexible in nature. A unit structure that is open for students to share their thinking and interpretations, with many opportunities for students to explore inquiries and develop deeper understanding and connections. In designing each of our lessons, we provide general ranges for how long we may expect micro-explorations, presentations or discussions to take place, but with the understanding that one learning experience within a lesson may prove to be rich in generating students' thinking and engagement and can be explored further as the group desires. In chapters 5-7 of this book, we describe the design and experience of leading three different international inquiry units that we hope will be useful in showing how the meaningful topics and goals identified for units align with what we ask students to inquire about in individual lessons.

*A few general considerations in planning individual lessons for International Inquiry Units:*

*1. Allocating Culture Building and Reflection Time Within a Unit*

This will be explored further within chapter 4, "Developing a Collaborative Culture for ESL Learners," but generally within a 90-minute lessons, we will allocate 15-20 minutes at the start of the lesson to check in with students, build personal connections with each other in the group, and support other daily routines and practices. This time can provide good opportunities for practicing different types of feedback, thinking moves (explored further in Chapter 3) and forms of dialogue that can support the shared learning within the group. As discussed in Chapter 1, this time for relationship building is essential for motivating both teachers and students involved in distance learning and language learning in general.

*2. What Content and Provocations Should Be Viewed Before-Class vs In-Class to Stimulate Discussion and Thinking*

To promote a flipped, student-centered mode of learning, we recommend having students complete the reading of the primary text chapters prior to class. Since many of our students host very busy schedules, we generally try to time things so pre-class preparation takes a 1:1 class time to prep ratio or less (i.e. for a 90 minute class, 90 minutes or less of homework preparation), with an hour of prep being ideal. On some heavier reading days, students may spend the entire pre-class prep time reading through chapters of the book. On other days, we may only expect 20 minutes of this time reading, and 30-60 minutes of this time researching or writing up their thoughts on a topic that we will be exploring further in the following class. In relation to our mission to connect the central book to a diverse set of authentic resources related to the topic, we often find it useful to introduce additional media resources (e.g. short news articles, clips from documentaries or films, an opinion piece) in class (which can typically be viewed in 5 minutes or less), before giving students opportunities to compare, connect, and think about extensions of their understanding and questions that emerge.

*3. Balancing Discussion About Book Content with Inquiry About the Larger Context*

As described above, based upon the goals and content of the book, educators are encouraged to identify a theme for every lesson or every couple lessons. Often, we will begin by discussing the content in the chapters - sometimes some of the most fruitful conversations arise from asking students to prepare a question they have about the chapter that does not have a clear answer and to identify 1-2 themes or symbols from the chapter. After discussing impressions and questions arising from the text, we will often incorporate some questions that raise discussion and thinking about the specific subtopic of the lesson – using the example from the beginning of the chapter about the Freedom Struggle and associated burning of foreign cloth, we may ask students to discuss ‘What stood out to you about the nature of the rally that occurred?’ and ‘What are your thoughts about this form of protest?’ From here we will weave in resources external to the book students found (if they were asked to research relevant topics before class), or the teacher may introduce a few additional resources to stimulate discussion and promote interdisciplinary understanding between the text and the larger topics or themes being explored.

In designing lessons, we generally seek for balance—neither focusing solely on the book content nor focusing solely on the topic outside of the book, but rather merging the two to create a synergy between the book and larger field of content.

#### **A Final Note - Student Learning and Growth through the International Inquiry Process:**

We as educators all too often focus on the deficit of ESL students’ language ability, rather than best practices in language learning that encourage viewing students as thinking partners with the ability to participate in multiple forms of expression (some English language focused and some not). HGSE Professor of Education and Linguistics, Paola Uccelli shares,

Through talk, we not only learn to talk, we learn to read, to comprehend, to reason with others, to understand others’ perspectives – these opportunities present a simulation of the social world. But at schools, voices are not equally distributed, researchers went to 20 urban schools in CA, FL, TX, NY, WI and measured how much discussion was happening in the classrooms and found that lower-track ESL classes only presented 7 minutes of discussion time on an hourly basis for students (approximately 1/5th of the time of other tracks). (Uccelli, 2018)

Measures of success in student learning emphasized in the Students for Students program include students developing an increased curiosity in the world and specific contexts, an increased motivation to study languages (seeing them as means for exploring the world), and a greater confidence in one’s abilities to proactively and effectively research and discuss issues of international importance. From participating in international inquiry units, on average after nine classes, we saw students’ self-reported confidence in exploring and discussing international topics in English improve by 35%, and students’ enjoyment of English study improve by 22%. In our experience as language learners, developing confidence and motivation to study a new language are like engines that can propel students forward to developing higher levels of fluency and nuance with the language. Throughout the learning process, we seek to emphasize the importance of humility and the value of sustained inquiry when learning about new places. We hope to see students more proactively utilize thinking skills practiced within our courses and to proactively adopt beneficial communication and collaborative study habits.



Perhaps most importantly, we also try to introduce some aspects of the culture and topic that are beautiful, fun, and interesting; we hope to help students nurture a greater appreciation of the context we are exploring.

In reflecting about his experience participating in our international inquiry units from 8th to 10th grade, one student in our program, Bob, wrote

Devon introduced us to the book “A Thousand Splendid Suns” and thus the amazing author Khaled Hosseini. To be completely honest, I only knew the country Afghanistan by its name at the start. However, diving further into the book with the specific tasks/discussions that we are going to do during class in mind, I began building up interest in this unfamiliar and bruised yet resilient country. And after exploring the very distinct characters in the book: Mariam, Laila, Rasheed, etc, I started to observe the vivid language used to illustrate those individuals and grew curious about the author. This curiosity eventually led to me reading all of his well-known novels, *The Kite Runner*, *And Then the Mountain Echoed*, and *Sea Prayer*. From which I acquired an immense amount of knowledge of modern Afghanistan history, multiple heart-touching stories and various writing techniques/methods that I still will be utilizing for my own literary work.

It brings me great joy to see that Bob’s international inquiry into the Afghan context did not end on our last day of class, and ultimately his reading of *The Kite Runner* contributed to a more nuanced and complex international understanding than it had for me in 10th grade; his response conveys an awareness, sensitivity, and respect for this new context that we hope to see from all learners who participate in international inquiry units.

Although we primarily offer these programs for intermediate to advanced language learning students (10-18 years old in age), we expect that International Inquiry Units will be of interest and benefit for learners who are not already familiar with the contexts being explored.

To help educators in creating their own International Inquiry Units, in **Appendix A** we have provided an International Inquiry Unit Planning Sheet. We hope that the following chapters describing our culture building processes, and the experience and design around multiple online units we have led, will be useful in supporting student learning, enjoyment, and shared inquiries about international settings online.

Footnote 1:

**Note on Selecting Appropriate Texts and Assessing the Reading Level of a Group:**

Our organization takes on a simplified approach to assess and place students in groups and select appropriate readings that we have found fairly effective. Pulling a couple sample pages from the books we'll be reading, we rank them in order of their Scholastic guided reading level (visit Scholastic Education for more specific information on their leveling system). For example: a few pages of a J-K book (approximately early Grade 3), a few pages of a S book (approximately early Grade 5) and a few pages of a Z level book (approximately early Grade 6 and up). In relation to these pages of text, we ask a few multiple choice and a few free-response questions to test students' understanding. For example, after reading a couple pages of a S level book, we asked students:

Where does this story take place?

Abuelo Marco is Flor's \_\_\_\_\_?

What do you think *baclao a la vizcaina* is?

What did Abuelo Marco ask "Flor" to do?

Many standardized reading tests are designed, students are encouraged to go as far as they are able to within the test. Such a basic assessment has proven useful for getting a general sense of the reading level of the group, and which book is within the range for the group. Scholastic Rankings most often use grades in relation to "native speaker" proficiencies (e.g. a Grade 6 book is meant Grade 6 for a student studying in the US context, not a Grade 6 ESL student in another country with one year of English experience.)

For these units, we hope that students will enter with an approximate proficiency level of at least an early Stages 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Level (Level J and Above), as many books about international topics lower than a J stay at a very surface level. For students who are older in age, but have a lower level reading proficiency, "high-low books" can serve as the "holy grail", books that tend to generate a high level of engagement and interest in students (and aren't obviously tailored to much younger learners), but provide a lower threshold for reading comprehension. *My Life With Chimpanzees* (by Jane Goodall) is a great example of this type of books, ranked a W (Grades 3-5), on the Scholastic Guided Reading chart, but she writes with a passion and authenticity that we've found to be engaging and thought provoking for middle school and high school readers as well.