

Lessons in Cyberspace

Teachers adapt what they find to what their students need

by JEANNE DELCOLLE

The Internet has become a tremendous resource for teachers both for the sheer volume of information available and for opportunities to connect with each other. Educators can collaborate through virtual learning networks like Edmodo. On Twitter, there is a chat group with the hashtag #edchat,

run by Tom Whitby (@tomwhitby), where one can ask questions on all things education and fellow educators respond. You can also find great materials with broad searches, as long as you are willing to adapt what you find to your classroom needs. I recently combined material from different online sources to prepare my students to write an essay on racism.

My inspiration came during one world history class, when a seemingly innocuous comment about race made by one student was found to be offensive by others. Students began to argue using reasoning based on their own experiences but without any historical perspective on the roots of racism. Our next unit, on 19th-century imperialism, was the perfect opportunity to continue the discussion. For their subsequent writing assignment, I asked my students to examine the political, social, and economic justifications for imperialism and to consider whether it was, or is, valid for one nation or culture to impose its values on another. I posed the question, Was racism an excuse for or a by-product of imperialism?

To provide the right content for the lesson, I needed more than the textbook had to offer. I started my Internet search by typing “imperialism” and “lesson plan” into Google. I found a number of potentially useful sites, including several that charged a fee to join. Not knowing the caliber of the lessons, and working with a tight budget, paid sites were not an option. Looking for lessons that were of high quality and free, I checked one of my favorite sites: mrdonn.org, on which teachers Lin and Don Donn collect the best free history lessons from cyberspace.

Although I found plenty of information, I wanted my students to understand *why* the imperial powers colonized. While searching on mrdonn.org, I came upon Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands.” Kipling wrote the poem in 1899, urging the U.S. to follow the lead of Britain and other colonizing European nations. It begins,

Take up the White Man’s burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;



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To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Kipling’s poem summed up the paternalistic mind-set I wanted my students to understand, but I knew it would be difficult for them to decipher. I needed an English-language-arts strategy for teaching poetry, preferably one that was interactive and aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

My next stop was one of the best sources of effective teaching strategies, especially those tied to Common Core skills, the Teaching Channel (teachingchannel.org), which features videos of real lessons by real teachers. I remembered seeing a video in the language arts section called Literary Analysis through Interactive Stations, in which small groups of students move through a series of stations to develop their understanding of a central concept before they write about it.

The first station is called the Wall of Silence. Students write an idea or quote from their reading on the wall and then read and respond in writing to the remarks placed on the wall by their classmates, drawing connections and asking questions. In Power Tableau, students act out a key idea and freeze in a pose when time is called. Finally, in Circle Discussion, each group addresses a question that is designed to make them think deeply about the text. After the groups complete all three stations, the students write their essays.

Any sound teaching strategy can be adapted to different content. But teaching is not just about content delivery: an effective lesson leads students to explore, question, and understand. The stations approach was originally created to help students explore the idea of silence in a nonfiction text; I made some adjustments to the strategy to make it fit my students and Kipling’s poem. Exploring Kipling’s poem through the interactive stations worked brilliantly, and my students’ essays on the complex topic of racism were some of the best they have written.

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