

Educational Resources and Developments

Earth Odyssey: Uzbekistan. Using the Web to Connect American High School and University Students with Personal Experiences in Uzbekistan

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College classrooms are not typically integrated with high school classrooms, particularly when it comes to teaching about Central Eurasia. Yet an innovative program designed by the Interactive Communications and Simulations (ICS) Group at the University of Michigan's School of Education has allowed the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies (CMENAS) to create a mentoring program for both high school students and UM undergraduate and graduate students who all interact through a website about Uzbekistan.¹

The ICS Group dates back to the early 1980s, when it first began sponsoring a character-playing simulation on the Arab-Israeli Conflict for a worldwide network of middle and high schools. Since then, thousands of students around the world have participated in ICS projects. Current activities include "Place out of Time," a historical simulation in which guests from every corner of the world and of history convene at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain to consider issues of security in the post-9/11 world. Non-simulation activities include a "Poetry Guild," a youth-oriented news service called "Highest Wire," and, since 1991, "Earth Odyssey." Earth Odyssey is an interdisciplinary adventure learning activity that "sends" students to places they may never visit in person. Using an interactive web site, students learn about the world's geographical and human diversity as well as the rich and varied cultural expressions of its people by reading and discussing "reports" posted by a traveler in a specific area. After six months of planning and writing, through the sponsorship of the CMENAS, the ICS

Group first offered the Uzbekistan Odyssey project in the winter semester of 2003.² It was offered for a second time in Fall 2003. The next scheduled course will be in Fall 2004.

Participants in the Odyssey fall into two categories. The first consists of middle school and high school groups who register to take part in the term-long Earth Odyssey project. These students engage in discussions that are facilitated by the second category of participants, graduate and undergraduate university student "mentors," who simultaneously study about Uzbekistan and about pedagogy in a class taught by the authors. The secondary students participate via the website and receive some assistance from their classroom teachers, who are in contact with the university instructors. The first semester (winter 2003) included high school students in Michigan and Maryland; second semester (fall 2003) participants were from the same Maryland school and from a high school in Vermont whose teacher was the co-author of a curriculum unit on Central Eurasia (see below). The teachers' schools provide Internet access; otherwise their participation is underwritten by CMENAS. While typically the author of the Odyssey is actually traveling when posting the reports, in this case Vika Gardner wrote the reports after she returned to the US. This enables her to be in the classroom with the college students, and where possible to visit the high school students while the Odyssey is under way.

Discussions unfold in response to reports written by Vika Gardner from Uzbekistan, where she lived during the summer of 1997 and September

¹ The current address of the site is <http://kawa.soe.umich.edu/ody/vika>; because of privacy concerns for the high school students involved, the site does not permit open access.

² It was through the efforts of Michael Fahy of CMENAS that the present authors created this particular "journey."

2000 through December 2001, and was accepted into an Uzbek family while doing her archival research on a religious figure from the 16th century.³ Her experience as a family member was different from that of a typical traveler who spends comparatively little time in Central Asia. As with her curriculum unit for teaching about Central Eurasia to high school students (Gardner and Steponaitis 2000; Gardner 2002), the intent of her Uzbekistan Odyssey is not only to present ordinary life in Uzbekistan, but also to help the students, both high school and college, reflect on what they have and how they live in the United States. The project is intended to foster a feeling among the high school students that they themselves are participating in a journey, a journey accompanied by a rich discussion with their peers and between the students and the mentors.⁴

Because secondary-level media must address educational standards in order to find a place in the classroom, several general fields are addressed across the reports, such as economics, ethnography, and politics. The reports discuss the physical environment (apartments, bathrooms, bazaars, utilities), social relations (families, parties, gender relations), food and politics (bribery, naming, public services). The point of the reports is not a general survey, but personal experience, painted in an accessible vocabulary. In order to catch the students' interest, issues are often couched in terms of questions that the author poses. For instance, one report discusses shopping in the bazaars in Tashkent. In addition to talking about how much items cost, how difficult it can be to do the math, and what kinds of techniques are needed, the report discusses the ethics of being a "wealthy" foreigner in a situation where bargaining assertively — a culturally valued practice — means taking money away from those who have less. The report does this by presenting a variety of views from people within Uzbekistan, people who have been presented in other contexts as well, so that the students can

³ Gardner's research in Uzbekistan, on Ahmad ibn Mavlana Jalal ad-Din Khwajagi Kasani (d. 1542), was funded by an Indiana University Office of International Programs Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant (1997) and by an International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) grant and a Fulbright-Hays grant from the US Dept. of Education (2000-2001). While the research they funded does not directly touch on the *Odyssey*, the *Odyssey* could not have come into being without this financial support.

⁴ The curriculum unit is available from the University of Michigan, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, (734) 764-0350 or cmenas@umich.edu.

"make friends" with citizens of Uzbekistan. A series of reports presents a trip to a small town near Bukhara for a circumcision ceremony; the discussion includes many details of gendered interactions, for instance, of spaces where women are permitted to be, and how decisions about women's clothing are made for women. The reports are short — typically only a page or two — sparking the students' curiosity. Pedagogically, the design prompts them to ask questions, helping them to think about how *they* would feel or react in a similar situation. Thus, instead of necessarily standing apart from the realities of life on the ground in Uzbekistan, the students' involvement and active participation "writes" the text, bringing it to life in response to each student.

The basic format allows reports from Uzbekistan to become available on pre-defined days, delimiting the discussion and carefully structuring development of concepts during the term. Photographs taken by the author illustrate most reports, and captions provide additional details. The site also provides for optional "glossary" items, links that open pop-up explanations (sometimes with pictures) of people, places, and terms with which the students and mentors may not be familiar. Both the students and the mentors can direct questions to the reports' author and receive quick responses. This is a distinct advantage over using a textbook or an article, especially for a high school class where a teacher may have limited information on an area like Central Eurasia and thus not be able to answer questions. If Gardner cannot answer the question herself, she can always obtain answers from her host family in Uzbekistan. Although not interactive in an immediate sense — it is difficult to give answers in "real time" when schools using the site are in different time zones — this give-and-take sparks critical thinking among some of the high school students, and fosters a real interest in the region.

The second group of participants is the university student "mentors" who facilitate the students' discussions and meet once a week in the college classroom. Since the class is not a required course for undergraduate teacher certification candidates, most of its students do not have teaching as an academic or career focus and come from outside the School of Education. The Uzbekistan Odyssey conducted in Fall 2003 saw an influx of students from a combined Master's and Certification Program, which enriched discussions of pedagogical issues. The university instructors, Jeff Stanzler and Vika Gardner, provide content expertise as well as

communication skills training. The university class helps the mentors gain confidence both in their knowledge and their decision-making abilities. One goal is to provide a crash course in the part of the world being discussed, Uzbekistan. For the first four weeks of the class, the mentors intensively study Uzbekistan, reading several articles per week that focus on ethnicity and politics in post-independence Uzbekistan. Because to date none of the mentors have anything more than a rudimentary knowledge of the region, these preliminary weeks are designed to provide the mentors with enough information to contextualize (and interrogate) Gardner's reports. Like most novice teachers, the mentors learn as they go, becoming acquainted with the central topics of the project just ahead of the secondary school students. Once the Odyssey is under way, attention shifts to the second goal, to train the mentors as facilitators and teachers. The process of mentoring is "on the job training," made the more difficult because there is no face-to-face contact with the students, and the mentors lack the kind of information a classroom teacher would have about his or her students.⁵ The mentors learn how to develop among the students the ability to define and articulate their own ideas, read their own writing and that of others with a critical eye, and take a fresh look at their own lives by aspiring to understand how others live theirs. Content-based discussions in the college classroom tease out student errors of fact and explore additional reading keyed to the major topics in the reports.

One of the challenges for the mentors is the diversity of student backgrounds and perspectives, something that can affect group dynamics in the on-line discussions just as it does in a classroom. Both the mentors and their students need to be trained to keep an open mind about multiple perspectives in a conversation. In addition to the on-line interaction, the mentors create lesson plans that attempt to integrate the Odyssey into a classroom activity or plan. These lesson plans, which form a library from which later users of the Odyssey can draw when using the site, allow the university students to explore in greater depth ideas or issues presented in the reports. Some of the mentors have done significant work with primary sources such as Uzbek-language newspapers and magazines.

⁵ An exception was a visit by the university class to one of the participating Michigan schools which provided the opportunity for the students to meet their mentors and for Gardner to show artifacts from Uzbekistan.

We have been impressed by the seriousness with which the university students take their roles as mentors and how much they have learned from the process. For example, one of the Business School mentors found a connection between the class and a psychology course that he was taking on group behavior. He expressed surprise at what some of the students were willing to post publicly, and in the process of deciding how to share his own ideas, he learned how closely intertwined are discussions of "substantive issues" with larger questions of human interactions. Another of our mentors expressed something of a teacher's pride at his realization that as the term ended he was seeing several postings that were truly making him think, reversing the experience from early in the term when he felt that *he* was the one who had to make the students think. On the content side, the university students become knowledgeable about the diversity of the region; like the secondary students, having formed a personal connection to Uzbekistan, they have a basis for looking into the region further. It is as if they have had conversations with a variety of citizens from Uzbekistan, and they can see that each commentator's "truth" does not necessarily make another one's "false."

In the end, one must address the question: Does such a program work? For the college students, it is an opportunity to develop hands-on skills in mentoring, which, of course, is a specialized form of communication in many different careers. The project has surveyed both participants and teachers to determine its success in high schools. Students at John Glenn High School in Michigan reported that they now understand more about Uzbekistan. Their teacher said that the Odyssey was more successful in engaging the students than his usual "world affairs" unit had been. One of the best tributes was the evaluation by Wafa Hozien, the teacher in Maryland who participated in both semesters:

I have found nothing more powerful than the Odyssey experience via University of Michigan since I started teaching 12 years ago. To see students evolve from regular American students to (being) worldly, cultured and sensitive to others' views... is remarkable.

There are plans to run the Uzbekistan Odyssey again in the fall of 2004, and other Odysseys are under way. High schools teachers who would like to participate should contact Jeff Stanzler at stanz@umich.edu or at (734) 763-5950.

References

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