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GENOCIDE PREVENTION: GENOCIDE EDUCATION PROJECT NATIONAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL OF CAMBODIA

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Teaching a Class on Cambodia to a Diverse Population in a United States High School

Miriam Morgenstern

Introduction:

Looking back, I realize I have been teaching Cambodians for my whole career. My first experience was at my first job in an adult education center in Schenectady, NY in the early 1980s. A Cambodian refugee told our small class about her experience as a child growing up under the Khmer Rouge regime. In attempting to keep her daughter safe, her mother had told this young woman not to speak and so she had become mute for several years. For this Cambodian student, speaking English, although challenging, allowed her the opportunity to share her trauma in a safe environment. At that time, I was a young woman myself, and I knew little about Cambodia and what had happened there. And yet all these years later, I still remember her story and where we were sitting when she told us about her experience.

For the past 14 years, I have been teaching in Lowell High School in Lowell, Massachusetts. Lowell High School has a student body of approximately 3,400 students and is the second largest high school in the state. It is also one of the most diverse high schools in the Commonwealth with over forty different languages spoken in the students' homes. The City of Lowell has the second largest ethnic Khmer community in the United States. According to the Lowell School Department, approximately 29% of the student population is Asian and the overwhelming majority of this group is Cambodian-American. In addition, the high school has many immigrant students and therefore a large English as a second language program. Many of the new arrivals are from Cambodia. Others come from The Dominican Republic, Liberia, and Brazil. 60% of the students' families are considered low income.

A New Course: Cambodia: Culture and Conflict:

Two years ago, I suggested to my department head that I teach a course on Cambodia. I had already been teaching Facing History and Ourselves, a nationally recognized curriculum to teach about social justice and genocide, and especially the Holocaust. My experience teaching about the Holocaust made me consider the possibility of a course about Cambodia. With close to 30% of the student population having a Cambodian background, a course like this seemed both appropriate and

necessary. Lowell High School has Khmer language classes taught by Cambodian-American teachers, most of whom entered the United States as refugees. But these classes are not diverse; all of the students who take the classes are Cambodian-American. I knew a course on Cambodian history and culture would have to be different; it would have to attract a representative sample of the student body if it were to be successful. And if it did attract a diverse group of students, I would need to find ways to engage all the students and make them genuinely interested in a country and culture about which they knew very little.

External Issues Surrounding Class:

Several issues came up with faculty and other staff about offering this course. The first issue was that many teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff believed this was a class from which only Cambodian-American students could benefit. I needed to dispel the myth among guidance counselors especially, but other staff as well, that this course was for Cambodian-American teenagers and would only be interesting to Cambodians-American teenagers. In this regard, it helped that I wasn't Khmer. I could explain that the class was going to be about Cambodia, but the themes covered in the class would be universal, global, and relevant. On the other hand, there was also an undercurrent of distrust among the Khmer school staff about a non-Cambodian teaching the course. Individually I spoke to Khmer language teachers and other support staff about my background in Holocaust education and my training as a Facing History and Ourselves educator. I explained that I am not an expert in Cambodian history, do not speak Khmer, and I am aware of my own limitations in content. Instead my expertise is in pedagogy and delivery of instruction. I further explained that Holocaust courses are taught around the world and without the expectation that the teachers will be Jewish. In fact it is essential that mass killings and genocide not be seen as 'their' issue, but instead an issue that has universal implications for all people. One colleague, who had lived through the KR regime, told me that she just needed reassurance that I was not going to reduce Cambodia to a history of genocide, but instead look at different aspects of the rich and vibrant Khmer culture and history. Many of the Khmer staff became proponents of the course and acted as guest speakers in my classroom. The third issue that came up, and one I wrestle with still, is equity. If the school is offering a course on Cambodia, some argued, shouldn't a course be offered on Africa and/or the African American experience or the Dominican Republic? In this respect, I see the class as a beginning to a revamped social studies curriculum; a global, 21st century curriculum that will be inclusive of the diversity that makes up the United States.

Overview of Curriculum

The following is a rough overview of the curriculum I have developed for the class. It is still being tested and modified. It is loosely based on a Facing History and Ourselves curriculum.

- ✚ **Identity** - including identity charts, origins of student names, readings on identity from FHAO, excerpts from literature, the formation of the other, national identity

- ✚ **Group Formation/Nation Building** – effects of stereotyping and prejudice, power of words, cliques, ourselves and the other, nation building, colonialism/imperialism, development of political ideology
- ✚ **The Khmer people** – where did they come from?, what was their culture?, early civilizations including Angkor (rise and fall), GEOGRAPHY including mapwork, SE Asia, Asia, intro to Buddhism
- ✚ **French colonialism** – including info about period b/t end of Angkor and French entry into SE Asia, readings about French education system, comparison to other SE Asian countries and colonialism
- ✚ **Vietnam War**– communism, Ho Chi Minh, US involvement, bombing of Cambodia, including Sihanouk, Lon Nol, Civil War in Cambodia
- ✚ **Pol Pot and the rise of Democratic Kampuchea** – consolidation of power, ideology, sources of ideas (internal to Cambodia, external to Mao/China)
- ✚ **Genocide (Auto-genocide)** –
 - a. targeted populations
 - b. what happened – including survivor’s stories, excerpts from memoirs, The Killing Fields, Year One, Tuol Sleng, The Flute Player
 - c. US response/international response
- ✚ **Aftermath of genocide** – refugee camps, leaving Cambodia, refugees in America, Cambodia today
- ✚ **Lowell** – an immigrant city, young people/immigrant parents, PTSD, gangs, disassociation b/t parents and children, economic struggles (more general to immigrants in city)
- ✚ **Justice after Genocide** – looking at the tribunal, Nuremberg, Truth and reconciliation in S. Africa, revival of Khmer culture in US and Cambodia (Arn Chorn Pond, dance, Buddhist temples)
- ✚ **Culminating project** (possible oral history, family history, community member history, debates)

Again, this is a work in progress. It is hard to include everything, and yet it is important to leave nothing out. Also, the course is designed for an American high school and American high school students. It has to have a broad appeal. For example, when the class learns about Tuol Sleng, we spend a significant portion of our class time reading articles about the recent decisions by the Bush and Obama administrations regarding the use of torture by the US government. When the class studies the Angkor Temples, instead of lecture, students are given several visuals and are asked to analyze these visuals to create hypothesis about Angkorean culture.

The 21st Century Classroom

To create a dynamic classroom and prepare students for further education and jobs, it is essential to incorporate the following skills and themes into lesson plans:

More information on this topic can be found at <http://21stcenturyskills.org>

- ✚ Global Awareness
- ✚ Creativity and Imagination
- ✚ Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

- ✚ Communication and Collaboration
- ✚ Initiative and Self-direction
- ✚ Social and Cross-Cultural Skills
- ✚ Leadership and Responsibility
- ✚ Good Citizenship and Democratic Participation

Resources

Resources at the school are limited and there was no budget to buy materials or books. I have had to be creative about soliciting donations for books and other materials.

Textbook:

The History of Democratic Kampuchea by Kamboly Dy

I also use my own BLOG as a primary source of content information for my students. In the blog, I include information about traveling in Cambodia, the history of Cambodia, and the culture of Cambodia.

Memoirs:

First They Killed My Father by Luong Ung

Survival in the Killing Fields by Haing Ngor

DVDs:

The Killing Fields, S-21, The Flute Player, The Monkey Dance, Prime Time Torture, Year One, Vietnam: A Television History, New Year Baby, In The Shadow of Angkor Wat

Guest Speakers:

Guest speakers have come from the Lowell Cambodian community. In addition, I have been fortunate enough to have had email exchanges with Professor David Chandler. After teaching five classes a day, five days a week and planning and prepping every evening, getting quick answers to my questions from Dr. Chandler has been a great help. My students and I are all learners. In an increasingly complex world, we navigate through vast amounts of information, new methods of interaction, and rapidly changing technology. We look to the past for the understanding, guidance and patience that will help us to embrace a just and compassionate future.