

**Language, Literature and Art:
A journey through other cultures, a discovery of our own voices.**

FULBRIGIT SUMMER SEMINAR PROJECT 2002

**By: Jennifer E. O'Brien
English Department
Kingston High School
Kingston, NY 12401**

INTRODUCTION:

During the summer of 2002, I spent seven weeks in Thailand and Vietnam as a Fulbright scholar. This experience exposed me to the beauty and diversity of both countries and cultures. I became enamored with the terrain and all the cultural events I witnessed. By witnessing the richness and diversity of the Thai and Vietnamese cultures, through their music, dance and food, I began to think more and more of my own culture-what riches do we have? The original project proposal I had for this trip has changed a bit, partly due to the questions and ideas that came to me while traveling and partly because the lectures I attended did not pertain to my original topic. Thus, my project will focus on introducing high school students to other cultures through literature and artwork. It is my hope that this exploration into other cultures will allow them to see beyond their own world, but also force them to reflect on what makes up their culture.

As an educator who had this marvelous Fulbright experience, I also feel it is my responsibility to encourage students to travel and explore other cultures and lands. It became glaringly clear to me this summer that our own myopic views of the world are so sheltered and don't always allow room for differences and changes. Along with exposing my classes to literature and artwork from other cultures, it is equally important that I expose them to the possibility of travel. Students need to know that reading all the books they can find on the Vietnam War cannot replace taking a bus ride up to Sapa in Northern Vietnam or crawling through a Viet Cong tunnel outside Saigon; pictures cannot truly convey the beauty of a water puppet show or the performance of Thai dancers. Walking the streets of distant lands and absorbing the air and foreign language through your skin is living and learning.

The projects will center on several primary formats: Epistolary writing, Vietnam War unit, Folktales/ Poetry and Writing from Art. These activities will be used in my 9 Honors, 11 Regents and Creative Writing courses. However, I think that with a few changes, they could be easily adapted for other courses/classes.

Epistolary Writing-

This idea jettied through my mind before departing for the trip and really crystallized as I found myself sitting in Internet cafes all over SE Asia. Bangkok,

Chiang Mai, Hanoi- wherever I was, I knew that I was only a few keystrokes away from accessing my email account and writing down memories that would be saved by family members until I returned home. For all of us on the trip, the Internet became our most reliable link to home. In a world where cell phones can virtually eliminate privacy, and can allow you track down anyone anywhere, it was refreshing to be forced to use language and letters to convey to those back home the myriad of experiences I was having.

Materials:

My email text and photos, excerpts from *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, maps of Vietnam and Thailand.

Student Activities:

- Examine short excerpts from Walker's book to see how entire stories can be constructed using this format.
- Students will listen to, as well piece together, many of my emails from the summer.
- After reading and discussing the material in my emails, students will clip particular lines or phrases that resonated with them. Working in a small group, students will use these "snip its" to create a found poem. Students will give titles to these found poems and share them with classmates.
- Using journals, students will keep up a correspondence with someone of their choice. Each week, they will select a segment from this correspondence to share.
- Using their own ideas, students will create a fictional correspondence between two characters. There will be at least 4 letters for each character. When completed, this story will be shared with classmates who will write critiques about what can be learned about each individual character as well as the general situation.

Vietnam War Unit-

Objective: I want students to not only consider and connect with the young American soldiers who were sent to Vietnam, but also to look at the war from both sides. Through their own writing and reading, I want them to question how it would have been to be a Vietnamese soldier? How would it feel to have your home country invaded? The literature we will read, as well as stories and pictures from my trip will help to provide the students with a well-balanced base of knowledge.

The books that we will examine for this unit are:

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

Catfish and Mandala by Andrew X. Pham

In Country by Bobbie Ann Mason

Vietnamese Folktales - Retold by Vo Van Thang and Jim Lawson

Nam: A Photographic History- by Leo J. Daugherty

Other Materials:

- Photographs and Digital Pictures of my journey through Hanoi, Sapa, Hue, Hoi Ann and Ho Chi Minh City
- Stories and pamphlets from my trips to the War Museum, Cu Chi Tunnels
- Information from informal discussions with Prof. Tang

Writing Activities:

Students will respond to these stories and write their own in the following formats:

- Reader Response
- Writing from Lines — (begin with one of the author's lines)
- Diary Entries (one from an American soldier, one from a Vietnamese soldier)
- Writing from Art (students will create fictional stories as a response to the photos and artwork they will see. The artwork will serve as prompt for their writing.)

Folktales/ Poetry Unit

Objective

Folktales are a great vehicle to learning about another culture. Through these brief stories, the reader learns some of the symbols and myths that are important to the culture. They are also usually accompanied with a moral ending, another lesson for the reader to learn about the culture. Folktales often give symbolic explanations for natural or unexplained happenings. By using this format as a model, students will have the opportunity to create their own folktales that offer explanations about events in our culture or in nature.

Poetry is easily accessible to students, because regardless of the author, the feelings expressed and questions posed within the poem remain essentially the same. It is important for young writers to witness this: the universal search for truth and understanding that compels all writers to put pen to paper.

Folktales and Poetry Collections that will be used for this unit:

- Vietnamese Folktales- Retold by Vo Van Thang and Jim Lawson
- The S.E.A. Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories & Poems- Edited by Nitaya Masavisut and Matthew Grose
- ASEAN Short Stories & Poems by S.E.A. Write Awardees 1999- Edited by Srisurang Poolthupya

- Thai Tales - Folktales of Thailand- Retold by Supaporn Vathanapnda, Edited by Margaret Read MacDaonald

Folktale Student Activities:

- Generate a list of symbols, cultural icons and lessons that are prevalent in the Thai and Vietnamese folktales. What can the reader notice from the lessons or intended morals of these stories?
- Look at some of our own folktales. What morals were they intended to teach? What parts of our culture/society are reflected in these stories?
- Create a Venn diagram to pinpoint the similarities between the folktales from Asian cultures and our own. Is there any similarity in purpose? Subject matter?
- Students will write their own folktales. They need to consider what moral or lesson they want to present as well as what elements of their own culture they want to incorporate into their plot.

Poetry Student Activities:

- Review of basic poetry terminology and vocabulary
- Review rules for “Attacking a Poem”
- Have students select 2-3 poems from the collections to use for a close reading/explication.
- Brief oral presentations about the explicated poems—what is the poem saying? What attracted them to the particular poem?
- Writing from titles- many of the Asian poems we will be reading have universal titles (Examples: “Questions”, “Winter Letter”, “Waiting”, “Written by the Sea”). Students can select a title and create their own poem/interpretation of that idea.
- Poetry Reading: After reading and writing poems, students will host a “coffee house style reading”. At this event, students will read their original works as well as the Asian poems that inspired them. It will be a perfect venue for the entire school community to witness the student’s writing ability as well as hear what they have learned from reading poetry from other cultures.

Writing From Art-

This is a unit I have used in the past and found that it was successful. For those who are visual learners, this exercise works well. Many students just need a basis or “starting point” for their own stories, and by using artwork; students are able to select that beginning. Two students may select the same picture, and depending on their focus, the resulting stories can be entirely different. It forces students to look at details and focus on a few key points.

Materials:

Hoa-Si-Do Manh Cuong- Truong Dai Hoc My Thuat Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh

(Collection of paintings by the artist)

Postcards! Greeting Cards from my travels

Photographs from my travels

Student Activities:

- Create an interior or dramatic monologue piece based on what you see in a particular picture. What do you see? Any particular person on which you will focus?
- Create a brief dramatic scene, based on another picture. Involve two or more characters. What is the situation? What are they discussing? What is the conflict? How will it be resolved?

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