

Selling Biography: An Opportunity Cost of Using Biography to Teach World Cultures

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Introduction

There exists a constant battle between unlimited desire and limited resources. This conflict is easily understood as all people, everywhere find themselves wanting more but limited by their means to attain it. Thus, scarcity, the limited supply of resources, is experienced by everyone in various ways and, as a result demands economization. This compulsion to economize forces an understanding of choice, and how exercising choices require tradeoffs and how tradeoffs exemplify opportunity cost.

Before we continue, however, let us define what we mean by opportunity cost. In simple terms, opportunity cost is the cost associated with doing one thing instead of another. Sleep or study, spend or save, write or read - opportunity cost is measured by the cost of what is given up in order to open opportunity for the other. Choices, whether mere or multifaceted require tradeoffs, sometimes significant, sometimes minor, always economized. Therefore, as in life, economics is always at play inside and outside the classroom and is either a familiar friend or a formidable foe. Perhaps most applicable to the classroom are the constructs in which teachers work. Teachers make choices daily and each choice affects their instruction. Those decisions are often concerned with the type of curriculum they choose to use in their classroom. An eminent leader in the field of curriculum theory, Joseph Schwab strongly advocated for teachers' direct and dynamic involvement with respect to matters of curriculum choice. Teachers, he said, are the "fountainheads of the curricular decision" (Schwab, 1983).

The place at which we now find ourselves, as teachers, is one of individual empowerment; free to choose, free to try, free to create and/or free to modify on the one hand yet bound by those very same freedoms on the other. What teachers choose to use within their individual contexts demonstrates the active nature of opportunity cost; for each decision, in the midst of these “moments of choice,” decisions are made in favor of implementing a particular type of content or method of teaching, while other types of content and/or methods of teaching are forgone (Schwab, 1983). Economics governs our abilities and regulates our capabilities as it requires evaluative measures that help determine what Schwab refers to as the crucial questions of teaching: (a) what to teach; (b) who to teach; and (c) how to teach (Schwab, 1969).

Out and Back Again

Individually, we bring our own personal narratives to this study. As you will see, for each of us, the journey to this point in our doctoral research program has taken us from the classroom into academia and back into the classroom. Paths within doctoral programs are varied and they run the gamut from theory to practice and everywhere between. When reflecting on our narratives, we find that each is uniquely individual yet share commonalities. Moving forward, you will read the researchers’ stories, how they were led back into classrooms and how they formed a proactive approach toward bridging the theory to practice gap.

Reaching for More. After four years as an elementary school teacher I headed back to school to pursue a doctorate degree in Curriculum & Instruction. While I loved teaching and having an impact on young learners, I wanted to make a bigger impact. As an elementary teacher I was only able to impact the 20 students that came through my class each year. I knew administration was not for me, but my natural leadership abilities and passion for education led me to develop a desire to support and teach future educators. I believed becoming a teacher

educator would give me a greater reach and allow me to impact students across the state. My goal has always been to put out the best teachers possible, by helping them to develop their own style, philosophy and passion for education but I found myself, in my first-year as a doctoral student, missing my young students terribly. I missed interacting with children, collaborating with my elementary teacher colleagues, and supporting students' growth and learning.

As a new doctoral student who had to focus on theory, coursework and research, I was not prepared for the disconnect I saw between educational research and practicing teachers. I remember listening to professors talk day in and day out how their research had won awards or given them grant funds, yet I was confused how this affected students or teachers. Was the goal of educational research not to positively affect and inform teachers and students? It concerned me that much of the research I was seeing seemed vastly separated from what was happening in classrooms. As a determined graduate student who was desperate to work on projects with direct application to classroom teaching, I began working on numerous projects in several content areas. I stretched myself as far as I could in hopes of finding a way to impact students and teachers yet what I saw was fellow doctoral students as well as professors going into schools and constantly 'taking' from students and teachers. Taking observations, taking interviews, taking surveys, the classroom was a place to gather data. What was the researcher doing to ensure that the students and teachers learned from this experience? Did they share their data analysis with them or work to help them understand their findings? What did the researcher leave in return for all they had took from these classrooms and what were they doing to bridge the theory practice gap?

As I was feeling pressure to build my vita through publications and presentations, I feared this was causing me to become selfish towards what was important. Research cannot be

about self-gratification through publications, presentations, awards and grants. I was involved in so many projects and programs yet none of them allowed me to focus on what I truly desired, and what really mattered, practical research and teaching. After that first year I made a promise to myself that I remind myself of daily. A promise to always keep the teacher and student as the focus, and to only take on projects I was passionate about and that directly impact students and teachers.

Finding my Footing. Leaving the classroom after twelve years was difficult. On the surface, the opportunity to start a PhD program looked amazing. I was ready to move onto this next chapter in my education with the hope that becoming a professor could provide a new motivation teaching at the university level. It did not take long to realize I was struggling to engage while remaining out of the classroom. Finding myself missing the engaging nature of teaching, I found ways to physically get myself back into the classroom by serving as a substitute teacher. After all, I felt comfortable doing what I was good at. Anything else was an obstacle that kept me from really affecting students. Initially, sitting in PhD classes seemed burdensome. It was clear that the university environment, even in a college of education, was wholly different than that of the public-school environment. Professors talked of theories and studies and ideas and nonsense! I thought so much of it was nonsense and the nature of its impracticability was almost maddening. Academia in my context was like stepping through the looking glass, a world wholly separate from reality. Suffice to say I struggled to find footing. Was it possible to find a way back into the classroom while simultaneously engaging as a PhD student?

Part of this struggle had to do with the nature of a research university. In an endless pool of educational research what lasting effect does that research have in the classroom? Do we look to resolve the theory/practice gap? Are we widening the gap by exploring great ideas that fail to

empower teachers? Are teachers and students viewed as potential data sets that serve to provide researchers with information for research papers? Researchers looking to bridge the theory/practice gap find ways to use practical and real research for the purpose of positively affecting students and teachers. In fact, real and practical research serves the student and it serves the teacher. Real and practical educational research is not self-serving. It realizes its limitations, it acknowledges its failures as well as its success and it desires to improve, in some way, the opportunities for students and teachers to grow. It is never satisfied with the status quo and it does not seek change for the sake of change. It always looks to the needs of teacher and students. It serves teachers and students; it is not served by them.

Bridge Building. In the Fall of 2017, as we were preparing for a conference proposal for the Texas Council for the Social Studies, we discovered our shared desire to impact practicing teachers and students. Our presentation topic emerged as we researched 6th grade World Cultures curriculum which focuses on the various cultures across the globe yet was solely absent of people. We hoped that by bringing in biographies and narratives, teachers would be able to support their student's understandings of cultures they were learning about. Our goal was to provide teachers with real resources they could take back to their classroom and use immediately.

Determining what matters to teachers is difficult if researchers fail to ask the right questions. Little good comes from a laboratory approach to educational research. Asking the right questions comes from having listened to the needs that exist in schools. With deafened ears, the theory/practice gap is further widened. Setting out to find something that mattered to teachers and students was no easy task. As former teachers, we understood the challenges in today's classrooms. Viewed broadly, the social studies, in the public-school environment lack the

personalization that they should be afforded. In general, when looking at the World Cultures curriculum, there emerged a vacancy of humanization. As a result, we felt there was a need to equip teachers with tools that would incorporate a human perspective into the subject. Students would benefit from the opportunity to engage in the biography of a real person from the country studied. From what we could tell, resources like this were not available. In a sea of curriculum resources, the likelihood that teachers would find biographical accounts of people whose cultures were being studied was low. While some teachers may have looked to incorporating some biographical examples in their World Cultures studies, on the whole, the economic, social and political characteristics of a country were highly generalized across entire regions with little regard for the individual stories of people in those regions.

The more we worked on our presentation the more we realized that one presentation was not enough. We felt that all teachers should have access to the things we were creating so by the time of the conference we had a website with resources for both elementary and middle school teachers that included documents, pictures and a blog. We had a Facebook and Twitter page to promote the website and even had promotional items like stickers and business cards in the mail. What we ultimately had was a way back into the classroom for two former teachers looking to make a difference in the lives of students and teachers.

Making the Curriculum

We called this new venture Biogiraffe. The term is a play on the Spanish word “biografia” meaning biography. The use of the giraffe was due to the animals’ height, as it can see beyond its immediate surroundings, much further than other animals. We hope that by combining our 16 years of classroom experience as well as our skills as graduate students, we could use Biogiraffe as a platform to bridge the researcher to practitioner gap. We hope to

provide quality resources for teachers that enhance the social studies by focusing on people and their stories. To create these resources, we developed an eight-step framework which we call The Biogiraffe Process. Figure 1 represents the process.

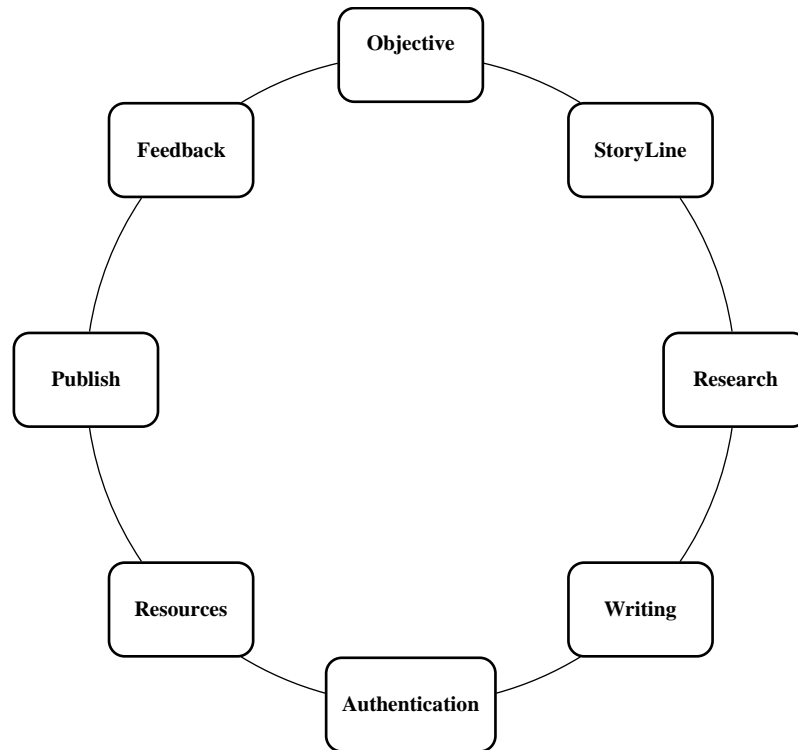


Figure 1. The Biogiraffe Process

The process begins at the top of the cycle with Objective and begins to move clockwise. In the Objective stage we determine the unit or culture in focus. In order to maintain timeliness and relevance we consult with a local school district and use their 6th grade World Cultures scope and sequence documents to determine the order in which units are taught. We also consult the state standards to ensure our resources remain aligned. Next, we develop the StoryLine. In StoryLine we think about interesting stories and people that can help students learn about a particular culture or idea. This stage is one of initial exploration and inquiry. We reach out to friends, families, co-workers, classmates, community members and others in order to find a participant or participants willing to share their story. Once we have identified our participant, we move to the

Research stage. In Research we investigate the culture in focus so we have a basic understanding of some of the characteristics of that culture. We determine interview questions and interview methods and after the conclusion of the interview we transcribe and analyze. Additionally, during analysis we are able use pictures and other materials provided by participants. Next, we move onto Writing. In Writing we begin a draft of the narrative itself by using the transcript to identify economic, social, political and environmental (ESPN) factors that the participants discussed. We focus on the ESPN factors and use it as a framework because students are responsible for understanding these four aspects in each culture they study. After the narrative is drafted, usually one to two-pages of text, we provide the participant with the draft so they can make any changes, modifications or additions that they feel will enhance their story. We refer to this as Authentication. It is important to note here that we can only authenticate one participants' story at one point in time. We in no way advocate the generalizing of culture based on the participants' story. Our goal is to provide students with one perspective of one culture. In the Resources stage we create materials that allow students to display their learning and interact with the narrative. We do this by pulling out vocabulary words, providing definitions with a glossary, creating graphic organizers to highlight main ideas and provide open-ended questions for reflection. We include questions from each level of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy to accommodate a variety of learners and needs. After the completion of the narrative and resource materials we move to the Publish stage. We publish our resources on Biogiraffe.org, as well as on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, in the Feedback stage we encourage teacher collaboration through an online survey. The survey allows teachers the opportunity to provide their opinions regarding the resources.

Utilizing this process, we completed six Biogiraffe that include one to two-page narratives on real people. Each of these stories has supplemental resources including a modified Frayer model, a glossary of terms, graphic organizers and questions. We ensured each Biogiraffe had clear alignment with both state and national standards to promote its use in the classroom. The more Biogiraffe resources we post to the website the more we wondered if they were actually being used. We wondered what was the opportunity cost teachers had to deal with when determining to use biography resources in the classroom?

Framing Theory to Practice

Multiple sources in the literature describe the benefits of using biography in the classroom. In fact, biography as a teaching method is applicable in more than just the social studies. When attempting to determine teachers' struggles with teaching social studies, we may do well to draw on our own experiences as students and teachers. Looking at current trends toward test preparation, much of the nuance of social studies has been replaced in favor of quick facts and rote memorization using textbooks. As measures of comprehension advocate summative assessment and its accompanying quantitative data it brings, there will be a push for less nuanced perspective in the teaching of social studies.

Biography as Method. One of the most commonly used resources for many teachers is the use of the adopted textbook. Textbooks can lead to a sterile view of history and social studies that lacks personal connections and gives students a sense that it is mostly made up of facts (Leckie, 2006). Textbooks make it easy for teachers to perpetuate the belief that social studies can and should be memorized (Johnson & Ebert, 1992). Miller (1987) suggests that between 75 and 90 percent of social studies instruction is done through textbooks. "Although arguably a valuable tool, a textbook cannot lend itself to the same sort of detail, passion, or interest that a

story can generate” (Edgington, 1998). While textbooks are not ‘bad’ resources to utilize, it is important to understand that their purpose is to standardize curriculum in the most efficient manner possible (Edgington, 1998). We must remember that the more we standardize the less we individualize.

Biography can help fill some of the gaps textbook-only teaching creates in social studies classrooms. The use of biographies provides a means of understanding real people in the real world (Beauchamp, 1990). It gives students a means of engagement with a subject that tends to hold the reputation of being “boring.” Biography promotes engagement by allowing students to explore knowledge and skills of influential citizens (Ranshaw & Griffin, 2016). Nielsen (2009) suggests biographies allow students to uncover how people have shaped the world around them in a manner that seems less “academic.” Biographies also provide a means of transportation for students. Biographies of everyday people personalize learning for students and allow them to travel to unfamiliar places and experience unfamiliar things (Warren, 1992). Not only do students engage with others through biographies, they engage with their own interests and learning by engaging with the role models with whom they can identify (Brown, 1956).

In the World Cultures classroom, it is important for students to understand that there are multiple perspectives and beliefs within each country and region they study. By supporting students learning of differing points of view, we can position them to think empathetically (Lindquist, 1996). Biographies can avoid stereotyping of ethnic groups, which is a concern for World Cultures curriculum that is textbook and fact driven (Styer, 1984).

While the literature suggests biography should be utilized in the classroom, we know that not every biography is equally beneficial. It was suggested by Warren (1992) that when utilizing biographies teachers must provide students with tools and opportunities to draw conclusions

from what they read. This is only possible with adequate resources. Allen & Lashbrook (1980) argue that one of the difficulties of utilizing biographies in the classroom is the quality and range of scholarship available. This lack of adequate resources was something we hoped to mitigate through our new curriculum venture.

Narrative Inquiry: Method and Phenomena. When we created Biogiraffe, one of the major goals was to insert the people back into the social studies. We chose to do this with biography because we believe that the stories of people are the most important stories to be told. We believe students can learn from the experiences of others and can then see their interconnectedness with those they read about. Because of this belief in experience and story, we decided the best way to gather the experiences of 6th grade World Culture teachers would be to come alongside them in a relational manner. We utilized narrative inquiry due to its unique quality as both research method and phenomena.

Connelly & Clandinin (1986) refer to this epistemological interest as “personal practical knowledge.” Personal practical knowledge is referred as:

A term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any one teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p. 25).

This idea directly stems from the work of John Dewey who first saw teachers as “knowledgeable and knowing” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p. 25). Over the course of the study we utilized field texts, made up of our interpretation of the interviews, focus group conversations and feedback

forms. We hoped that by establishing a relationship with teacher participants, they would share their lives with us in a manner that would allow us to understand their perspective and what makes up their personal practical knowledge.

Setting the Context

For the purposes of this study we sought out three teachers from a local school district. Using purposeful snowball sampling we found three teachers who were willing to engage in our study. We set out to answer the following question: What is the propensity for teachers to use biography in their classroom? Stated another way, we wished to determine, through narrative inquiry, the likelihood that, amidst a plethora of choice in curriculum, teachers would be willing to use biography as a resource in the World Cultures social studies course. Going into the study we recognized the competition our resources faced. Other developed curriculum resources would take a backseat when and if our biography resources were chosen.

Students in the first units of 6th grade World Cultures, are introduced to economic, social, political and environmental concepts that will be applied to the cultures studied. Students learn the basics. Command, free and mixed economies are described, varying cultural characteristics are discussed, limited and unlimited governments are taught and finally, students are introduced to factors that point to environmental features that characterize the places being studied. After the conclusion of this first unit, students apply the economic, social, political and environment lenses to every culture to which they are introduced. This is easier said than done but presumably, as the school year progresses, students are better able to identify, analyze and evaluate how these characteristics generally affect the people in various cultures and well as how these characteristics compare to others they have studied.

When applied broadly, this brushstroke approach works well. However, when the teacher attempts to narrow the focus and burrow deeper, this broad method loses its effectiveness. It is at these moments when the use of biography is most applicable. For example, when students study the continent of Asia, the World Cultures curriculum does well to break it into regions. In this way, a region like Southwest Asia (or the Middle East) is the focus of teachers and students. It is easy to see that a region like the Middle East contains seemingly endless levels of complexity when it comes to economic, social, political and environmental factors. In fact, this truth extends globally. Employing biography allows teachers and students the opportunity to look into the life of an individual and his or her interaction in the economy, in the political system, socially and with the environment. Arguably, from the classroom, there is no better way to study a culture. At the same time, we realize the impossibility that this reveals to teachers and students. Considering the scope and sequence of the World Cultures course, it is impractical to even pretend teachers and students can study individual biographies sufficient to accurately tell the entire story of a particular culture. Despite this limitation, we believe biography offers a valuable glimpse into a culture.

Each of our participants teach at the same school and exclusively teach 6th grade World Cultures. Carl is a seasoned teacher in his ninth year, Michael is in his fourth year of teaching and Dottie has been teaching for 19 years. Each of these teachers have served as a World Cultures teacher for more than one year. Each teacher serves a different demographic. In order to protect our participants, pseudonyms are used. Figure 2 displays the groups of students each teacher works with as well as their years of teaching.

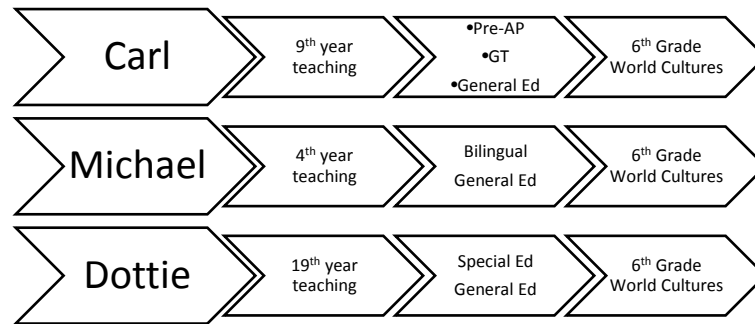


Figure 1. The teacher participants.

While quantitative methods seek to determine statistical significant with regard to increases in student achievement, our qualitative study focuses on the teacher perceptions of the biography resources used. We gathered information from feedback forms, individual interviews and a focus group. Each of these methods was meant to invoke reflective responses among our participants. We desired that each of their stories be presented as they evaluated the use of the resource. This occurs in a variety of ways and can be seen in the responses teacher gave during their interviews. We observed teachers that are highly reflective and understanding of their own limitations even as they describe the positive and negative attributes of the biography resource.

The teachers who participated in our study each taught social studies at least seven of the nine daily class periods. Each class period was 45 minutes in length. Actual instruction time varied and was not measured for this study. Presumably, teachers were required to address various obstacles that decreased their instructional time. Teachers were provided with resources for three World Cultures units. Each unit package included a biographical narrative, accompanying questions, a glossary of key terms, a modified Frayer model and a variety of graphic organizers. While teachers had access to the full unit package they were not required to use any of the materials. It must be stressed that this narrative inquiry sought to determine the propensity for teaches to use the resource. Therefore, teachers who chose to use our biography

resources were able to determine the parts of the unit package they desired to use. Table 1 provides information on resources utilized by our teacher participants.

Table 1
Biogiraffes utilized by each teacher

Teacher	Africa Resources	India Resources	China Resources
Carl	Did not utilize	Did not utilize	Biogiraffe and questions
Michael	Biogiraffe, questions, vocabulary and giraffic organizers	Biogiraffe, questions, vocabulary and giraffic organizers	Did not utilize
Dottie	Biogiraffe and questions	Biogiraffe and questions	Did not utilize

Field Texts to Research Texts

As we began moving from field texts to research texts, we began to see how our own researcher stories were being woven together with the participants' stories. As Barton (2004) explains, "narrative inquiry is about interpreting the threads of life woven in the fabric of our daily lives" (p.525). Threads are linkages that weave consistency throughout the inquiry and identifying threads provides continuity within each individual narrative as well as the meta narrative. Through this 'weaving' process we saw four major threads emerge. These threads include: (a) enhancement of learning, (b) reflective teachers, (c) diverse learners, and (d) the ultimate scarce resource.

The participants in our study indicated that the use of biography enhanced learning. This was accomplished through curriculum, connections and critical thinking. While their responses

differed, some participants made indications that their classroom curriculum improved as a result of the biography resources. Carl indicated that biography, “Gives real world examples to the country we are discussing.” Michael stated, “The way I think about it, we can talk about 2-3 people from the area we are studying and use the smaller group of people to learn about the larger scale. It’s hard for students to visualize the large sense of Africa.” We can see how these teachers viewed biography as beneficial to learning by providing a curriculum resource that was relevant to their World Cultures units.

Second, the participants commented about the real-world connections made by using biography. Carl felt that the Biogiraffe resources allowed students to see real world connections, a source of engagement for them, “Biogiraffe shows real world connections with real people that live today. Kids really like hearing stuff that is happening today.” Michael saw these personal stories as a method in which students would be able to recall information they learned as he stated, “Because when you think about major history topics such as reconstruction or the beginning of US history, you tend to think of the people and can associate those times with people.” Finally, Dottie commented,

We can see how someone is affected by the government for example. Kids sometimes get caught up in how things are here and think everywhere is like here. In my opinion, it is like a real-world example of a math problem. It brings that personal aspect.

Third, each participant suggested that the use of biography enhanced critical thinking in their students. Carl saw the progression of his students through the learning process when he stated, “With my GT students you can see the progression of answering questions, making connections and then generating their own questions.” Michael saw the reading and inferencing as enhancing critical thinking when he commented, “The readings are really good because the

answers are not right in the text and students have to infer. This is a basic skill they need to learn.” Finally, Dottie looked at biography more broadly when she mentioned critical thinking is seen, “Where they use the information from different perspectives to draw conclusions and answer big questions.”

A second thread identified by our participants was that of self-reflection. In each data gathering process, the feedback forms, the individual interview and the focus group, our participants engaged in self-reflection that spoke to the value of the resource to both them and their students. In fact, in some cases, their own reflections showed changes in their teaching styles when using biography in the classroom. This was the case when Carl commented that the next time he uses the resources he will go through more of a guided process as opposed to simply providing the resources to his students for individual work. He stated, “I’m gonna try with southeast Asia. I’ll have them read it individually, answer questions with groups and generate questions together and then answer them.” Michael said, when reflecting on the printed quality of the resource, “I think what I would do next time is have a color copy of the pictures on the overhead, so they can see a better version of those.” Finally, Dottie reflected on the supplemental resources that were provided. She commented, “Graphs and charts would always be helpful...and bringing in other content areas with stuff like that.” Interestingly, through the course of our time with these teachers, we learned that while each receives a conference period, none of their conferences are at the same time, meaning they rarely get to plan their lessons together. If they do, it must take place after all duties, clubs and other responsibilities are complete. The absence of a team conference means collective planning is often impossible. The process of talking with these teachers about how they utilized biography in their classes allowed them an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, something they rarely get to do with their fellow

World Cultures teachers. These reflective conversations were unique considering the realities of their schedules and not having group planning time together. As researchers, we were able to support that reflective thinking of the teachers just by being there to listen.

The third thread suggested by our participants was one that indicated that using biography provided benefits to diverse learners. Both Carl and Michael suggested that different groups showed varying success with the resources. Specifically, Carl stated, “With GT kids it especially was a very solid reading and resource. For my regular kids it was much too difficult, it was too high level.” Carl saw the vast differences in his students’ abilities and suggested a differentiated resource with “leveled resources.” Similarly, Michael showed variation among two groups. He stated,

My bilingual kids can relate to being both ‘Chilean and American’ or ‘Mexican and American.’ They can observe being dual cultures. I can identify that more of my bilingual kids than my gen ed kids can understand this. They [gen ed] have no way of relating to things out of their town. My bilingual kids can see the multiple perspectives.

Finally, Dottie saw a need for differentiation in the resource as well. She stated, when asked about multiple reading levels, “Yes. Having a high, medium and low reading level would be helpful.”

The final thread identified was the scarcity of time. Each participant stated, in various ways, that lack of time affected both themselves and their students. Carl stated,

It’s [Biogiraffe] an awesome thing to be able to do but we have to move at such a fast pace. We have very specific things to cover. It takes a whole day to do one of these justice. It really isn’t feasible in 45 minutes.

Michael said that time was scarce when considering, “Scheduling, time and the TEKS we are covering.” Dottie expressed frustration with regard to her own lack of personal planning time. She stated, “I don’t even have a time to plan with the other social studies teachers.” When asked about the general social studies familiarization level of the co-teachers that visit her classroom, Dottie again referenced her lack of planning time with her fellow teachers, “Let alone the co-teachers.”

Making Sense of it All

It is clear through our experiences with these teachers that biography can truly enhance the World Cultures curriculum in a variety of ways. The most prevalent and powerful preclusion to using biography in the classroom was time. As mentioned above, the social studies, in general, are squeezed in favor of other content area focus. The resulting lack of time causes teachers to find resources that expedite basic learning in favor of efficiency over effectiveness. Further complications arise with the varied level of learner in the classroom. While this is commonplace in every classroom and in every subject area, the lack of time allotted to the social studies, when compared to other content areas, means teachers have to focus more on expediency and less on choosing differentiated resources that enhance learning across all ability levels.

The decisions teachers are faced with every day can have major instructional impacts on their students. We all know that accountability measures have had their share of impact on teachers. Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the assessment craze has heightened with testing for all grade levels in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. These content areas tend to receive the majority of instructional time. If you have ever spent much time in elementary or middle school classrooms, you probably have experienced this shift by seeing less instruction in subjects like social studies and science which are typically not tested. Numerous studies have found that

social studies teachers in the elementary school typically only spend 20 minutes each day on the subject (Thornton & Houser, 1996; Brophy & VanSledright, 1993). Many believe that due to the mandatory testing in reading and mathematics, the subsequent subjects are, for the most part, not taught (Kohn, 2001). This suggests that many students are leaving elementary school with little knowledge of social studies, something that can cause major issues for middle school social studies teachers, teachers like Michael, Carl and Dottie.

Alleviating the problem of time takes time, and it is easier said than done. Considering the wide range of curriculum content available for free and for purchase, teachers have no shortage of resources from which to choose. This does not mean that premade resources are ready to be used by teachers. In fact, teachers' lack of time helps facilitate the inclination in teachers to use resources without properly evaluating their construction and their perceived effectiveness with their groups of learners. Time for critical evaluation of learning objectives, time for critical evaluation of premade curriculum resources, time for modification and differentiation of premade resources and, finally, time for the creation of new resources all must be taken into account. All of the above assumes the teacher has developed an understanding of the learners in their classrooms and can make accurate evaluations of what types of resources (and modifications of those resources) might best suit their students. Whereas teachers, polarized as curriculum implementors see curriculum resources as universal, teachers polarized as curriculum makers custom design the resources they use in order to have the resources serve the learner. It is the difference between viewing curriculum, as one-size-fits-all and bespoke.

This is a monumental task, that of making time, which requires defragmentation. In the interviews of each of our participants there were indications of the fragmentation that exists among their team. This was most prevalent in Dottie's case. The absence of the opportunity to

plan with her team means that daily interaction with all of the other World Cultures teachers is impossible. Further she does not have the opportunity to plan with her co-teachers. While we have exposed an unfortunate truth, that social studies teachers are losing valuable instructional and planning time, we hope that by providing teachers with a method to improve their own curriculum materials, they can make the most of the time they do have. As researchers, we hope to improve these resources based on conversations and collaboration with these teachers. To go a step further, we hope to encourage in-service and pre-service teachers to create materials of their own that best suit their and their students' needs. In a culture where lessons and worksheets are simply a click away, it is easy for teachers to get caught up in consuming curriculum and do away with producing it. We see the process of producing curriculum as a way for teachers to take ownership of what they are teaching in the classroom.

We believe that, as a society, we understand and embrace the importance of choice as it relates to the things that we think work best for us. Restaurants offer menus and the freedom to customize based on taste. Retail clothing stores offer varieties of clothing options in an assortment of sizes. In nearly every facet of our consumer lives we are afforded the opportunity to choose based on our preferences. In education however, this ability to choose is severely hindered. Teachers spend hours with groups of children and are seldom encouraged to be creative with curriculum making. Somewhere along the way we traded individualized attention for a more standardized approach. We do not see this standardized approach in only state tests; instead, we see it every day in classrooms filled with students who are increasingly subjected to a one-size-fits all curriculum. This problem needs a remedy and we believe this remedy is applicable to current and future teachers and administrations.

Teachers must be willing to take back their power over their approaches to curriculum for their learners. Administration at every level, local, state and national, must be willing to empower their teachers with supportive measures that enhance and ensure teacher confidence. Teachers must assert themselves as classroom experts by constantly looking for ways to customize curriculum for the diverse learners in their classrooms. Administrations must recognize and nourish the expertise of their teachers by encouraging curriculum-making and proactively providing avenues toward teachers' professional content development. Teachers must be afforded the opportunity to practice and hone their craft. Administrations must aim to establish a least restrictive teacher environment that allows teachers the flexibility and the freedom to try, to create and/or to modify what they teach and how they teach for the diverse learners they teach. Teachers' creativity and passions must never become a scarce resource. Administrations must never forget their roots as creative and passionate classroom teachers and that while their role as leaders affords them certain privileges, true leadership inspires and serves those that follow them. Simply, teachers must be afforded to opportunity to teach.

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