

“Connecting with Japan and Its Cultures through Literatures”

Project Overview

Rationale: Increasing relationships between the United States and Japan signal the need for current and future learners to be able to function in the global marketplace. Consequently, learners must possess accurate knowledge of Japan and its cultures to interact successfully with Japan’s diverse groups. We, educators, can empower our learners by giving them permission to cross cultural borders while using our classrooms’ social spaces/“contact zones” to provide easy access to other cultures. Since cultural messages are transmitted through narratives, literature becomes a powerfully, effective vehicle for accessing other cultures.

This unit introduces learners to Japan and Japanese and Japanese-American cultures through literatures. Short stories by contemporary authors from these cultures form the unit’s foundation and are paired with works from other genres to explore themes including silence, identity, roles, and deceptions. A cultural studies approach facilitates exploration of literary works as cultural artifacts and allows reading and exploration of texts in terms of the cultural and historical contexts in which they were written. As learners interpret and analyze works, they use their own cultures as basis for comparison. Subsequently, intertextuality occurs effortlessly as learners relate values and practices of a text to seemingly unrelated ideas, beliefs, or practices from the same time period in which the text was created.

The literary centerpiece of the unit is “Seventeen Syllables” and its author Hisaye Yamamoto. Exceptionally strong storytelling skills including the successful use of the hidden narrative, creation of vivid female characters, and focus on issues of gender, race, and ethnicity make “Seventeen Syllables” and Yamamoto the ideal focus. Cultural activities include art, music, an informal tea, and virtual tours of museums and galleries. Extending this unit’s learning to the course’s literary research project is feasible. Finally, Mrs. Sumie Kawamura, a native of Japan and former Japanese language school director and teacher, will serve as cultural guide.

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