

# An Approach to Afro-Asian Studies

David S. Eldredge  
and Clark Moore

A GLANCE at the front page of any metropolitan newspaper will create the impression that half of the biggest headlines today refer to events of significance in what were once considered remote corners of the world. Yet our curriculum planning and textbook writing have not kept up with this shift of world emphasis; the overwhelming percentage of our social studies programs are still dealing almost exclusively with the Western world.

It is becoming increasingly necessary that citizenship training include a background of information as a basis for intelligent judgments concerning problems which have their roots in alien cultures.

Related curriculum planning challenges our profession and is receiving increased attention on many fronts. It is gratifying, for example, to find that many of the "World History" texts now being published are attempting actually to live up to their title by including units on the non-Western world. Furthermore, some schools are feeling their way into this area. The required minimum of one semester's study of World Cultures instituted in the Pennsylvania public schools is indicative of this trend.

Pioneers in this endeavor, however, face many problems, such as: objectives; selection of content; distribution between historical, cultural, and current material; and sources.

At George School we have had an unusual opportunity to wrestle with these problems. A generous private grant afforded members of our history department extra time to develop a twelfth

grade Afro-Asian Studies course, including materials, for secondary schools. The grant enabled us to review the existing literature and audio-visual aids so that we were able to make critical selections. Next, we edited the most suitable literature and charts, and compiled mimeographed volumes for classroom use.

Our first objective, over and beyond the general objectives of any social studies program, is to prepare the students to understand selected geographic areas as they exist today. This understanding involves more than a knowledge of the contemporary problems of these areas. It requires enough historical background to provide insight into the origin of the problems, as well as an appreciation of the area's culture, without which historical facts and economic statistics are meaningless.

Our second objective is to reduce the student's cultural egocentrism to the point where he can appreciate cultural, political and economic deviations from his own environment. We must enable our students to escape temporarily the clutch of their own culture so they may study the reasons for deviations open-

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*Clark Moore is Chairman of the History Department and David Eldredge is Director of the Afro-Asian Studies Project at the George School, George School, Pennsylvania, a Friends secondary school.*

mindedly, rather than with a Sunday-afternoon-at-the-zoo attitude. This is necessary because our culture, as in all cultures, has us convinced of its superiority and has trained us to regard anything which differs from it with suspicion, derision or, at best, condescending patronization. Objective study of alien cultures does not imply rejection of our own values, but rather understanding that institutions usually evolve to meet the needs of the community.

A third vital objective is to introduce certain basic concepts applicable to underdeveloped lands in such a way that they may be related to similar areas at a future time. These will be explained.

The realization of our next two objectives is dependent upon the first three, because we want to show the relationship of Afro-Asian problems to: United States foreign policy, the Cold War, and international organizations.

Lastly, we hope to stimulate students' interest and develop their ability to analyze new situations as they arise in the non-Western world.

We feel that these objectives can best be achieved through an intensive study of a few areas. We selected China, India, the Moslem world from Morocco through Iran, and sub-Saharan Africa; within the latter two, part of the study is again based on representative countries. Our criteria for selecting these were that they contain the cultural root stock for peripheral areas and are focal points in the world scene. We feel an inherent weakness of expanded World History courses or World Culture courses is too wide a coverage, preventing a study in depth.

We hope breadth is compensated for by common denominator concepts, such as: (a) the nature of a traditional society, (b) the nature of the impact of

an industrialized society on a traditional one and the trauma of transition, (c) nationalism, and (d) problems of political evolution and economic development.

Each of these ideas is developed at the appropriate spot in the first two units, China and India, so that in subsequent units, it is necessary only to point up local variations to general principles and then make comparisons with other areas.

Our basic objective of creating a useful, viable image of these areas as they exist today conditioned our selection of material for each unit. Approximately one third of each unit is devoted to the geographical, anthropological and cultural background of the area. Here, in line with our objective of reducing cultural blindness, we try to show the validity of the culture for the environment in which it evolved, and attempt to see its "bizarre" aspects in the proper perspective. Furthermore, we do not feel that a great deal of emphasis on the esoteric aspects of the culture is essential for understanding the dynamics of a culture today; overemphasis of this is a weakness of some current civilization courses. This first third of the unit also includes a chronological glimpse of pre-European history to show that these people had histories before Europeans came to write them, and also to show the historical reasons for their contemporary institutions and attitudes.

The second part of each unit deals with the impact of the West on the people under consideration, their resulting transitional development and emergence under the spur of nationalism.

The last third of the unit includes the period from independence to the present with emphasis on problems facing new nations.

More traditional courses often concentrate on culture and history, but do not come to honest grips with the more controversial present. We feel each enriches the knowledge of the other two, and is in turn incomplete without them.

The structure of the material within the units is basically historical, with the geographic, cultural and contemporary material presented topically at the appropriate place. Structural similarity of units facilitates comparisons and contrasts between areas and the carry-through of the basic concepts from unit to unit.

### Methods

Hopefully we have developed an intensive, highly organized course with a maximum of penetration and a minimum of lost motion. This end is enhanced with the selected mimeographed readings with introductions and guide questions designed to accompany any good basic text such as the paperbacks which we use. The sources of the readings are varied: newspapers, government documents, literature, speeches and writings of political figures, and readable books on specialized major topics.

There are four categories of readings according to the use we make of them. First, there is factual material not adequately covered in the text, usually related to one of the basic concepts which we want to stress. Second are the analyses of situations and, where possible, two conflicting analyses of controversial subjects are presented for critical comparison by the student. Third is primary documentary material. Fourth is background literature, such as *The Good Earth*, to give a student the "feel" of a culture or an historical movement.

Thus, we have gathered reference ma-

terial from which the student can develop a critical understanding of the subject. We consider development of critical thinking skills and habits to be a prime responsibility of the social studies. Thus we have in this case sacrificed library research skills stressed by advocates of group study methods. In using these methods, students, too often from a poorly constructed general background, are sent to do inadequately directed research in a sparsely stocked library. Thence they return and unload on their classmates a hash of relevant and irrelevant facts, largely undigested, which the teacher may not be able to edit and make meaningful. Whether used for pedagogical reasons or to compensate for a teacher's inadequate subject matter preparation, this method is often unproductive.

Students should, instead, be able to analyze documents, look for the bias in partisan statements, make specific or general comparisons, and project hypotheses from known facts and a given trend. After students have developed their content and conceptual knowledge, they will be given an opportunity to study independently an area new to them.

### Evaluation and Prospects

The results from half a year of teaching Afro-Asian Studies to students of varied ability have been gratifying. We are particularly pleased with the motivation of the students. The course has meaning in terms of world developments of which the students are conscious, and the challenging nature of the readings has also served to stimulate creative thinking. Furthermore, we are satisfied that our major ideas and concepts are

(Continued on page 522)

4. *Pupils and teachers are together for continuous periods of time greater than a single period.*

More uninterrupted time allows for greater flexibility and variety in learning activities.

Greater continuity in learning experiences is possible since units or topics may be explored with less regard to fixed time allotments and period changes.

Better opportunities are available for pupil-teacher planning and evaluation.

There is easier scheduling of field trips and the use of resources outside the classroom.

Flexibility in program permits teachers to choose educational topics of value to early adolescents whether or not they "fit" the particular "subject area."

In summary, the evidence here presented places responsibility for a suc-

cessful block-time, unified studies or core program squarely upon the shoulders of educational leaders, especially the local school administrator.

The many benefits of block-time and core are realized only when administrators and other leaders practice sound principles of democratic leadership in initiating, developing and sustaining the program. Preservice and in-service courses should give added stress to these essential skills. Greater attention to these qualifications should be given when administrators and other top staff personnel are selected. Numerous successful block-time and core programs attest to the fine leadership being provided in many school systems. However, survey results indicate that there is much room for improvement.

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#### Afro-Asian

*(Continued from page 503)*

being understood, remembered and applied in a meaningful way to different situations.

Naturally, we are not satisfied with all phases of the course as it stands. Course content and readings will be revised after classroom trial. Detail in some sections of the course has obscured rather than clarified major points. Objective tests, study aids, teacher aids, and an annotated bibliography of literature and audio-visual aids have yet to be completed.

Because the curriculum described here seems broadly applicable to secondary schools, our grant stipulates that we should produce materials available for other schools' experimental use. We anticipate sharing these materials with

others next year. The Afro-Asian Studies project will benefit from the resulting evaluation.

We believe that teachers with comprehensive social studies backgrounds can handle a course such as this with some special preparation and adequate teaching materials. Careful study of a good college text on each area, reading on general concepts, and/or a summer institute, will provide reasonable preparation. Carefully delineated unit outlines, as contrasted with all-inclusive "teaching units," can give teachers a needed sense of security. Challenging readings for students provide a basis for meaningful discussion which relieves the teacher from struggling to breathe life into a subject enervated by an insipid text. Similar objectives, however, are perhaps also obtainable through judicious use of carefully selected paperbacks, periodicals and other materials.

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