



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A NON-WESTERN CULTURE—A HIT IN THE MIDWEST

“This is Africa” (TIA) is a phrase and an acronym from *Blood Diamond* (2006), a film in which the main characters are living in Sierra Leone among people who are being exploited by the diamond trade—their lives disrupted by kidnappings, displacement, explosions, and mass killings. This film proved that Africa is more than movies’ myths created by Disney’s talking animals or Burroughs’ Tarzan. We further dispel these myths in an international studies course in our Midwest college, providing students with a view of life, experiences, and the culture of people living on the African continent. This course attracts maximum numbers of students each semester, even in the evening; students enrolling in this course typically are pursuing teaching careers, but many are simply interested in America’s role in Africa.

The Course

Classes are team taught by an instructor in the social science department and an instructor in English and language studies. One semester I teamed with a social science professor, a Fulbright Scholar from the Cameroon. We wove his informative lectures about the Bamileke people and community, clan, class, commerce, and commitment to religion into the course syllabi. The students created their own connections with the continent, using maps, media, movies, and these vibrant lectures and conversations with this special scholar.

An Emphasis on Sharing: Reaction Papers

Perspectives on Africa began to creep into the community—photographs at a local art gallery; performers (drummers and dancers) who returned to the Midwest from their African adventures with their own interpretations of what they saw; an artist using the lost-wax method to create his sculptures; and local news coverage of countries in conflict—e.g., Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Other African exhibits were available at the nearby Field Museum in Chicago, University of Illinois, and University of Iowa. Students who visited one of these exhibits and wrote about their perspectives re-

ceived credit for this special opportunity. Students were to include the following in their reaction papers—name of exhibit, artifacts displayed, most memorable experience. Throughout the semester, students were invited to experience local museums, art galleries, and cinemas.

Research Papers

Early in the semester, students selected a research paper topic, exploring an ethnic group’s lifestyle and influence in West Africa. Topics included women’s roles among the Ewe people; clean water for the Bambara people; life near the Sahara for the Wodaabe people; children in war in Liberia; non-governmental organizations in the Bamileke community; marriage among the Luo; initiation rites among the Ibo; salt mines and the Tuareg people; and market women among the Asante.

Beginning with an introductory pretest, we focused on students’ myths and stereotypes of the African people. Once students selected their research topics, they submitted a tentative thesis, topic, and reason why they wanted to research the topic; an annotated bibliography, with at least five sources (at least one book); a rough draft; and a revised final draft. Submissions were returned with comments. Students were to work on the project early, reread, rethink, and revise. Students received points for each submission and had access to these writing aids:

- OWL (online writing lab, offered by our staff)
- Writing Lab (meetings with a professional editor)
- Research paper tips (early-bird sessions—e.g., advising students about available web sources for information about Africa)

Presentation

Information gathered for the research paper supported students’ oral presentations, scheduled for about the middle of the semester. Students received points for design of the visual aid, overall appeal in voice and content, understanding of the topic, and use of notecards. Three students per class meeting presented their summary of major research findings, allowing for additional instruction during class time. In addition, each student submitted two questions for the final examination,



drawn from the information provided in his presentation about his research. These questions were distributed to all students prior to the presentation, engaging the class in carefully listening. Students have used an array of visuals, including poster board displays, ceremonial masks, drawings of artifacts, PowerPoint presentations about AIDS, and performance by a middle school dance group.

A Hybrid Class

Students were enrolled on the site via the Blackboard system. The class sessions were held in a classroom, but most of the information for the research paper notes, suggested topics, books in our library collection, websites to explore, directions for writing the paper, extra credit, library videos and CDs, due dates, and office hours supplemented the syllabus on the Blackboard site.

Complying with the college mission, we have identified several goals for this course, including students acquiring an awareness of world knowledge and the tools necessary to gather information needed to function as a responsible, productive, ethical member of society.

Conclusions

We also offer classes in Latin American, Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultures. We hold an International Fair one Saturday each November, and the community is invited to experience our international students as they provide samples of their native foods, items of interest from their home country, and up-close views of their native dress.

It is exciting when a course fosters change. Students walk into the classroom with stereotypical views and walk out after a semester of study, significantly more informed. "This is Africa" has led us toward a sharper picture of an emerging continent full of complexities and traditions.

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