EDU 380 Culturally Relevant Teaching

Assignment: Single Group Study - Group Investigation.

Cooperative Teaching/Learning Project will be composed of a group of students working together on an assigned topic. Class time will be used for students to work in their expert groups focusing on learning/teaching about one ethnic/cultural group in the U.S. (for example: Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Refugees from Africa…). Each person will take part in a class presentation and submit an individual report as part of a total group report.

My Journey to Understanding the History/Culture and social issues of the African Diaspora (specifically Congolese), with a focus on the group’s perspective about itself, and my reflection on what I learned and how it will impact my teaching.

Teacher education programs often champion the importance of cultural awareness, requiring teacher candidates to engage in demographical investigations of schools and communities. It is the duty of schools of education to offer a lens through which to examine the issues surrounding educational practices and policies as they relate to specific cultural groups. Yet I think that few go so far as to empower teacher candidates with the freedom to focus this lens on the cultural group of their choice. With this idea in mind, I set about to make the most of my single group study by choosing a cultural group which I feel is most deserving of a closer look. For our single group study, the two other members of my investigative team and I decided to research the perspectives, histories, and cultures of African refugees in the United States.

For us, the decision came from a mutual desire to learn more about the African refugees with whom we work closely every day. The ESL students that we teach at Fowler High School represent an incredibly diverse range of countries and cultures. Most are refugees and many are from various countries in Africa. However, to attempt a broad analysis of the culture of all African Refugees, we agreed, would undermine the uniqueness of each country. Therefore we decided to narrow our focus to three specific African countries: Somalia, Eritrea, and The Democratic Republic of Congo (also referred to as DRC). We chose these three because they are among the more prevalent countries of origin for the African Students at Fowler, and we each had a personal interest in one specifically. This made it very easy to
divide the work. Elizabeth Steria decided to focus on Somalia, Jacklyn Woods looked into Eritrea, and I chose The Democratic Republic of Congo.

Before beginning my research, I had some very impressionistic ideas about the Congo. These impressions were derived mainly from books I’ve read, and bits of news I’ve stumbled across. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is one novel in particular that piqued my interest in the region. The novel, which is set in the Congo of the late 19th century, was once the central focus of a lesson plan I created for an adolescent literacy course. In the process of creating the lesson plan, I engaged in a superficial study of Congolese history, mainly about the ivory trade during the colonial period. Thus my knowledge of the Congo prior to this study is quite limited, especially with regards to contemporary issues and events.

Dividing the work for this project was simple because we each took charge of our own investigations of one country. We conferred regularly to discuss the layout and structure of the Brochure and power point. Both of these documents were made accessible online using google docs so that they could be continually reviewed, updated, and edited by all of us at any time.

The main questions that I have now concern Congo’s early history. What sort of civilizations existed prior to Belgian colonization? How was the territory divided? What kinds of government were in place? Additionally, I am curious to find out more about the contemporary issues facing Congolese people both at home and abroad. How do Congolese people view their nationality? Do Congolese feel nationalistic pride, or are their loyalties to other things like lineage and ethnic groups?

I plan to get information mostly from online sources for statistics about Congolese living in the U.S. I plan on consulting the U.S. Census bureau website. So far I have found a number of print sources with information about Congolese history. I have also found several websites dedicated to and run by local Congolese communities in various cities in the U.S., including the website www.friendsofthecongo.org which provides links to resources and support for Congolese and people interested in Congolese culture.

My research began with an overview of the general statistics and facts about the Democratic Republic of Congo. The most striking of these statistics was that there are an estimated 242 languages
spoken in DRC today. Most of them are derivative of the Bantu language family branch. This led me on a search about the migration of early Bantu peoples and the ethnic composition of DRC. I was interested to find that Bantu people, who inhabit most parts of sub-Saharan Africa are not considered indigenous to the Congo region. The first peoples to inhabit this territory were the pygmies who are a minority in the country today, and face many challenges as they struggle to find their place in African society. For the brochure, my group mates and I decided to include a segment about each country’s flag and the symbolism therein. In researching facts about the flag I discovered, among other things, that the flag dates back to only 2006 when the country underwent a regime change and a new constitution was adopted.

As I struggled to wrap my head around the complex history and development of DRC, I found the continuous theme of exploitation of the country for its natural and human resources. Then, I discovered that Congo is often said to be “geologically cursed.” It is a darkly tongue in cheek quip made by many Congolese intellectuals who try to make light of their nation’s violent past while calling attention to the role of foreign powers in the exploitation of DRC for its abundance of precious metals and minerals.

The Congo was, like so many other African nations, devastated and perpetually destabilized by the European slave trade, and by the time King Leopold of Belgium established, without official decree, his own private colony in the region (which he ironically named Congo Free State), millions of Congolese were dead from malnutrition, overwork, and malaria. Leopold, then proceeded to commit such atrocities against the people of the Congo that the Belgian state was forced to step in. Diplomatic pressures forced the state to officially annex the region so as to partly wrest control from the maniacal king and quell the protests of Belgian citizens and other European powers. Official Belgian colonial rule, however, did not prove to be a great improvement for Congolese as political interests continued to closely parallel economic endeavors which benefitted only white Europeans. Once a rich, powerful, and independent kingdom ruled by black Africans, the Congo had become the neglected and abused colony of a small and reluctant European nation that was quickly losing its already tenuous grasp on the political reigns of a nation swelling with injustice.
European colonization divided and drained most of the entire African continent, and yet the Congo stands out as a testament to the barbarism of Colonial rule. Perhaps because of its exceptional natural wealth or its ease of access by way of the Congo River, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been subject to a particularly gruesome history of exploitation and systemic violence.

Unfortunately, the violence did not end when the nation gained independence in 1960. The nation’s first Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, was a pivotal leader in the independence movement and he is widely regarded as an icon of progress and justice in the Congo. Only a year later, Lumumba was arrested and assassinated following a military coup by U.S. and Belgium backed Dictator Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko, who renamed the country Zaire.

Mobutu’s government was favored by western powers because it was regarded as friendlier to capitalist interests. Mobutu’s presidency was categorized by oppressive rule, corruption, and economic stagnation. Soon the country was in turmoil once again and Mobutu was eventually ousted when Tutsi rebels, fresh from the Rwandan genocide, began inciting insurgencies in the eastern part of the country. The centuries old Hutu-Tutsi conflict and the general instability of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and other neighboring countries led to years of civil and international wars in DRC. Eventually peace treaties were signed in 1999, however, the lack of strong centralized government, the enormous amount of displaced peoples, and the general poverty of the country have made peace keeping a real challenge.

As of 2013, DRC was given the second lowest Human Development Index score of all participating nations. DRC ranks 186 out of 187, Niger being the lowest. The general quality of life in DRC today is very low and many people continue to struggle to survive as refugees in a country of refugees and perpetual war.

Since the time of colonial rule, a chaotic pattern of migration was established in the DRC and throughout neighboring countries. This has made it difficult for refugees to receive services they desperately need because they are either unregistered (and therefore stateless) or are actively being persecuted by the government or rebel groups of the country in which they are seeking asylum.
Those that are able to obtain refugee status outside of Africa, like many of my students in Syracuse, eventually find more peaceful living conditions. But even then, the bitterness spawned by years of ethnic warfare is often carried overseas. One of my students who was born in Rwanda but lived most of her life as a refugee in DRC once told me that she has a tough time getting along with other African girls at the school because she is Tutsi and they are Hutu. At first, I found it hard to believe that this war was still impacting her life in such a way regardless of the thousands of miles and ocean separating us from its source. Then, I thought how naïve it was of me to believe that the physical and mental scars inflicted on a child growing up in war zone could be so easily washed away by distance and time. I remembered how she described watching her mother being killed by Hutu rebels and about her own narrow escape. I remembered her calm but not cold attitude, and her astoundingly positive outlook on life. I realized in that moment that, although many Americans view Africa as one giant savage country caught in perpetual civil war, the true spirit of Africans and especially Congolese is most resilient and beautiful.

I am extremely glad that I had the opportunity to do this research because I now am able to see the true strength of any refugee coming from a country ravaged by war. I think that too many educators are quick to dismiss ELL’s with histories of interrupted formal education as stupid or unmotivated. Indeed, too many educators make these same assumptions about American minority groups who are native speakers of English. Somehow though, it is easier to not think about the lives of ELL’s before they first walked through the doors of an American public school. It’s easy to not ask the difficult questions about our nation’s role in promoting the very instability that led so many refugees to seek asylum in our borders.
Annotated Bibliography

1. **Refugees (Homepage)**
   
   http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/refugees
   
   This is the official Department of Homeland Security website. I came to this source while researching information about the process of obtaining refugee status in the U.S. I found several checklists and resources for people who might wish to apply for asylum as well as legal definitions of Refugee which I used in the opening slides of the power point.

   
   This article published on an online blog by The Guardian offered a portrait of several Congolese musicians. It describes their unique styles and includes interviews with the artists in which they describe their experiences as ambassadors of DRC abroad. I used this information when writing and thinking about how Congolese music has influenced music all over the world and in considering Congolese perceptions of identity.

3. **Raising consciousness about the challenge of the Congo - Congolese Culture (Raising consciousness about the challenge of the Congo - Congolese Culture)**
   
   http://www.friendsofthecongo.org/congolese-culture.html
   
   This website is dedicated to and run by local Congolese communities in various cities in the U.S. It provides links to resources and support for Congolese and people interested in Congolese culture. I used it mainly to find information about Congolese religion, art, music, and conceptions of identity. I think the source is valuable because it is clearly curated by Congolese.

   
   **Article Title:** Democratic Republic of Congo profile  
   **Website Title:** BBC News
   
   This BBC world news article provides a bulleted summary of many of the most significant events in the history of the DRC. It mainly outlines the development of the nation through colonial rule and war and is not very nuanced, but it offers important and verified facts about the political situation in DRC over a long and somewhat confusing history. I used this when deciding what event to describe in the history portion of my PowerPoint.  
   https://congoayuk.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/is-linguala-the-most-spoken-language-in-drc/  
   This website offers clear and detailed information about the many languages spoken in DRC. The linguistic map shown in the languages of DRC slide is taken from this website. The information that I obtained here helped me make connections between the numerous languages and ethnicities of DRC and allowed me to see how they are geographically distributed.

5. **Is linguala the most spoken language in DRC? (CONGOLESE ACTION YOUTH PLATFORM Blog)**
   
   https://congoayuk.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/is-linguala-the-most-spoken-language-in-drc/
   
   This website offers clear and detailed information about the many languages spoken in DRC. The linguistic map shown in the languages of DRC slide is taken from this website. The information that I obtained here helped me make connections between the numerous languages and ethnicities of DRC and allowed me to see how they are geographically distributed.