

## Curriculum issue

# Teaching History and Culture to Foreign Language Learners through International Exhibitions

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This essay examines the value of teaching World's Fair history to second-language learners. The class aims to give students the experience of a traditional academic seminar in an English medium environment, but with sufficient language support and cultural explanation. The fifteen-week seminar course generally follows the EAP approach in that it attempts to create a positive environment for students to understand academic content, familiarize students with academic vocabulary, and encourages academic skills, such as note taking and academic research (Jordan 8-12). Construction of the course also draws on CLIL and an awareness of the need for sufficient language support, such as pre-lecture vocabulary, and visual support, including presentation slides. The attraction of teaching a class on World's Fairs is the multitude of topics that can be explored, such as economics, politics, gender, racism, class, social movements, cultural representation, and the creation of national identity. It is also possible for these themes to be explored through a very specific focus, such as a specific piece of art, literature, architecture, film, new technologies or scientific innovations, a controversy, or an important individual. Such a variety of topics introduces students to a wider breadth of academic vocabulary. The course theme also allows students to learn something about modern Japan, its cultural interactions on the world stage and its influence on Western culture.

International Exhibitions, or Expos, are global events that have a long history, beginning in London in 1851 and continuing to the present. Before the establishment of the international governing body, the Bureau International du Exhibition (BIE) in 1931, these events were known as International Exhibitions, Great Exhibitions or World's Fairs. Today, the BIE recognizes 4 distinct types of expos (World Expos, Specialised Expos, Horticultural Expos and the Triennale di Milano). The most commonly known type, and the one that generally receives the most attention, is the "World Expo," which take place every 5 years. The last world expo was held in Milano (2015) and the next is scheduled for Dubai in 2020. Aichi Prefecture hosted an Expo in 2005 (Bureau International du Exposition).

Expos were the first truly global events and, especially in the 19th century, they were a significant communication medium. For example, they introduced audiences to new techno-

logies, scientific discoveries, new forms of music, art and entertainment, and new visions of the future. As exhibitions evolved, they became important venues for discussions of global issues and the sharing of ideas. Historian Alexander Geppert refers to them as "mass- and meta-medium[s]." He argues that "world's fairs of the 19th century were the contemporary equivalent of the present-day world wide web (Introduction). As he writes, "Prior to the introduction of television in the 1930s, no other medium reached a larger, more cosmopolitan and more heterogeneous audience" (Geppert, 5). Although their significance declined with the advent of new media like television, film and the internet, they continue to be "markers of modernity" and progress and still draw international attention, especially in non-western countries. For example, 65 million people attended Expo '70 in Osaka in Japan and 73 million visitors attended Expo 2010 in Shanghai in China. These exceeded previous attendance records.

The class, a third-year seminar entitled World's Fairs in North America, attempts to balance "receptive" and "productive" skills (Jordan, 9). Students prepare for lectures through readings, listening to lectures and taking notes, and reproducing what they have learned through discussion, short assignments, and other kinds of group work. There are several short research assignments and presentations throughout the course, culminating in a student conference held with another English seminar class and open to students from all departments. The student conference attempts to recreate an academic conference, with students required to present their work to an open audience and answer questions from the audience. Students in this class are in their third year in the Department of British and American Studies and most have a fairly good (upper intermediate, low advanced) English level. Some students who take the class have been abroad while others plan to study abroad. Occasionally international students enroll in the class. All students have had 2 years of English classes, including two years of academic writing. The course is mainly a social history seminar and students need to understand and be able to work within the discipline of history, at least at a rudimentary level. The assignments that are given are intended to develop these conventions and skills.

One aim is for students to realize that they cannot write or present about a topic without understanding the context (economic, social, political, etc). One type of short homework assignment that I use often is designed to achieve this end. First, before I begin to discuss the details of each International Exhibition, students are given specific events, social movements, political ideas, etc that defined the era in which an Exhibition took place. Second, they are directed to websites and asked to do research, take notes, and summarize the specific thing that have been assigned. They are asked to highlight new vocabulary, useful phrases, and create their own discussion questions for their groups. Third, they bring their summaries to class and report it to their group members (groups of 3-5). Moreover, other

skills are also being developed. Academic and language skills, such as research, note-taking, summarizing, being able to explain something effectively, as well as writing, vocabulary and discussion.

Another important element of historical study emphasized in the class is the understanding of the difference between fact and opinion and the necessity of evidence and the importance of specific details when writing about a topic. Thus, some short assignments are designed to have students focus on facts and details. One example assignment, is that students are asked to choose either a building with architectural significance, a sculpture, or a painting that appeared at an International Exhibition. This is because International Exhibitions usually had a main theme which was often used to give the event cohesion-for example the theme of the 1939 New York World's Fair was The World of Tomorrow. The theme choice in this case was a reaction to the Great Depression-organizers wanted to assure the American people that better times lay ahead. The themes were often reflected in the architecture and the art on display. Sometimes, they resisted or challenged the theme. Students research and give a short power point presentation. Thus, they are asked to give the name of the artist or architect and some biographical information about the artist (like other well known work of art and awards or distinctions) the style of architecture (example Beaux Arts) or school of art (modernism) that it belongs to, and then asked to express their opinion on the meaning of the work of art or what an artist or architect is trying to say/achieve through their work.

There are several themes explored in the class with the aim of stimulating critical thinking. One important theme is the creation/construction of national or cultural identity. Since International Exhibitions are events in which various nations put themselves on display, it is fairly easy for students to understand that countries make choices about what/who they include and exclude in exhibiting their nation and understand that national or cultural identity is not fixed or unchanging but is historically specific. One example of the construction of identity is that of Poland at the 1939 New York World's Fair. The fair began as war threatened and continued as war broke out. Poland's exhibit featured achievements of the Polish state through fine art, decorative art, peasant art, industrial products and textiles. The Polish representatives wanted to show the long, rich history of Poland, its uniqueness and its shared Western values of democracy and Christianity. However, as Elizabeth Ziminica points out, in an attempt to display their national sovereignty, which was threatened by the war in Europe, they "glossed over... ethnic and regional... differences" to try to display "national homogeneity that did not exist" (iv). As several scholars, such as Robert Rydell, have pointed out, world's fairs were arenas in which nation states could win favour from nations considered to wield power in the international arena (Rydell). In 1939, the United States held significant power. The Polish government hoped to win the support of

the US through its pavilion (Ziminica).

Another theme explored in the class is power and resistance. International Exhibitions have been and continue to be created by business and cultural elites. As such, at these events specific groups are excluded or stories untold. The Chicago Worlds Fair, held in 1893, offers a good example of this. While a number of African Americans were included in the exhibition, many African Americans expected to be included in the planning and organization of the event and also expected that they would be represented at the fair. When this did not transpire, many members of the African community voiced their disappointment, including the African American press. Ida B. Wells, journalist and activist, refused to be silent—publishing and distributing a pamphlet highlighting the hypocrisy of fair officials and the inequality and violence still experienced by African Americans. There are a variety of primary sources that students can access on line, such as the pamphlet distributed by Ida B. Wells ("The Reason Why").

One final example of themes explored in the course is that of cultural transmission. Class lectures highlight the fact that it never flows in only one direction. A good illustration of this can be found in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Japan chose to recreate the 11th century Buddhist temple—Ho-o den—as its pavilion (along with a Japanese garden). Among the visitors to the fair was a young architect named Frank Lloyd Wright. His visit to the Japanese display influenced his aesthetic and architectural style. (deep roof overhangs and horizontal lines, simplicity). Wright would later tour Japan (1905) and eventually win a contract to build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Wright's work in turn inspired Japanese architects, notably, Arata Endo, and the modernist movement in Japan (Severns).

International Exhibitions are a great way for students to explore both history and culture at a deeper level. Students can approach fairly abstract concepts and theories through an examination of the material items, such as architecture, art and displays of technology and products. Academic content, carefully presented and supported, can help strengthen students' academic skills, such as note-taking, research and discussion, as well as improve or increase academic language skills, through reading and discussion. Teachers should not shy away from difficult concepts and challenging texts, but rather should attempt to pique interest, help students learn the skills they need to take on these challenges, and facilitate students' understanding. This requires careful construction of a course that creates an environment which is not intimidating and that provides adequate language support to build student confidence.

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