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ABSTRACT

This is an age of ascendency of the Pacific Rim area, especially the Asian sector. Recent decades have seen unprecedented economic growth throughout this area. By examining Japan, the region's pre-eminent nation and harbinger of future developments, the larger topic of the Pacific Rim can be explored. It is particularly important to teach about Japan in U.S. schools because Japan and the United States are increasingly interdependent. Japan provides an example of modernization without excessive westernization but continues to be a misunderstood country. The study of Japan has an important multicultural dimension and multiple perspectives should be used at every level curriculum and in virtually all subjects. Useful strategies include: (1) requiring students to examine an issue from at least one other cultural perspective; (2) presenting an historical perspective whenever possible; (3) asking students to examine values implicit in certain practices of Japanese society; and (4) introducing the Japanese language. (BZ)

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According to Ambassador Mike Mansfield, the interactions between two nations, Japan and the United States, are the most important bilateral relationship on earth. Sometimes it also seems to be the most difficult one as well. Newspapers carry daily accounts of U.S. trade deficits and slipping ratios of the U.S. dollar to the Japanese yen. Communities compete for Japanese enterprises while U.S. businesses protest the preferential treatment given to these companies. Because of its growing importance in world affairs, American educators are increasingly asked to teach about Japan.

How can teachers present an accurate historical and contemporary picture of Japan? What is a balanced view of U.S./Japan relations? This ERIC Digest examines (1) the importance of teaching about Japan, (2) useful strategies for teaching about Japan, and (3) the place of Japan in the curriculum.

Why Is It Important To Teach about Japan? We are in the age of the ascendency of the Pacific Rim area, especially the Asian sector. Daily, 4 out of 5 of the world's jumbo jets are found above the Pacific, not the Atlantic. There has been a profound shift in importance and influence toward the Pacific. The past decades have witnessed unprecedented growth in this area. Today, Japan is the pre-eminent nation in this region and, more importantly, a harbinger of future developments. Through Japan, the larger topic of the Pacific Rim can be explored, and students can be introduced to some of the realities of this part of the world.

- **Japan and the U.S. are increasingly interdependent.** Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of interdependence can be found in the economic realm. Japan has very few of the natural resources needed for manufacturing. Currently, the U.S. supplies many of these raw materials to Japan. That is, however, only part of the picture. The U.S. also supplies the Japanese with the everyday staples of life, such as razor blades from Warner Lambert (70% market share), disposable diapers from Proctor & Gamble (50%), instant cameras from Polaroid (50%), computers from IBM (40%), wine glasses from Owens-Illinois (70%), and even Tupperware from Dart & Kraft (30%). Currently, 50% of the Japanese caloric intake comes from imported food. Much of this comes from the U.S. in the form of such items as Coke, Del Monte tomato juice and Meiji Borden dairy products (a joint venture between Japan and the U.S.). The U.S. also supplies legal and insurance services. Japan provides the U.S. not only with manufactured goods, but also with investments. For example, in 1986 Japanese real estate investment in the U.S. was between $3 and $4 billion and should exceed $5 billion in 1987. Perhaps the most obvious examples of interdependence are in the auto industry. The joint venture between Chrysler Corporation and Mitsubishi Motors Corporation, which will soon be operative, will employ both Japanese and U.S. workers, and receive supplies from places such as Gadsden, Alabama and Union City, Tennessee. Is this a U.S. plant or a Japanese plant? Is this a plus or a minus on the U.S. balance sheet of trade? A study of Japan can introduce students to the intricacies of this interdependence.
- **Japan provides an example of modernization without excessive westernization.** Outward aspects of westernization abound in Japan. Kentucky Fried Chicken, MacDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, and Shakey's Pizza are pumping calories into the Japanese diet at an unprecedented rate. But to a large extent, this is superficial, a veneer that catches the eye and diverts deeper analysis. While Japan may look somewhat like the U.S., it remains very different. Aspects of the Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian religions continue to undergird the system; traditional values hold sway. An examination of the role played by these traditional values can provide clues to a modernization scheme quite different from our own western model.
- **Japan continues to be a misunderstood country.** Some textbooks and courses of study continue to lump Japan into an all-inclusive "Third World" category. This leads to confusion and misperceptions. Students blame cheap Japanese labor for our trade deficit. Few students learn that the yen appreciation has made Japanese employees the best paid in the world. Further, attempts at understanding Japan often exchange one stereotype for another. For example, we hear that Japanese society works well because of cooperation among groups. What are the historical, economic, geographic, and sociological reasons behind the propensity for such behavior? A detailed examination of Japan is needed to rectify the stereotypes of the past and update textbook treatments.
- **The study of Japan has an important multicultural dimension.** Japan is no longer an abstract textbook subject, far removed from everyday life. The proliferation of Japanese companies in the U.S. has brought with it a number of "corporate sojourners." These Japanese nationals, usually here for a set number of years, are today part of many communities. These communities are calling for increased study of Japan in order to facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

What Are Useful Strategies for Teaching about Japan? Study of Japan should be used to introduce multiple perspectives. The U.S. media, to a large extent, present only the U.S. perspective and approach to many aspects of U.S./Japan relations. What are other ways of looking at issues?

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1. Require students to examine an issue from at least one other cultural perspective. Fortunately, there are many useful materials that present the Japanese perspective. This is especially true regarding trade issues. The Japanese Consulates General, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) offices, and Japanese Chambers of Commerce are all excellent resources.

2. Present a historical perspective whenever possible. This notion is very closely tied to the idea of multiple cultural perspectives. Both Japan and the U.S. have a national historical consciousness of past events, and these often differ markedly. Furthermore, these historical perspectives often influence contemporary concerns such as trade and diplomatic relations. For example, U.S. textbooks inevitably herald the coming of Perry to Japan. The good Commodore is credited with the "opening of Japan." Most textbooks then go on to extol the virtues of increased trade. Japanese textbooks, however, stress that raw silk production at that time could not match market demands. Domestic shortages and rice hoarding ensued. Soon traders cornered the market and prices rose dramatically. Domestic economic chaos resulted. Two very different history lessons are taught here.

Similarly, Japanese textbooks characterize the United States after World World War II as a "taikoku" or "huge country." Profitable trade, burgeoning industry, and a high GNP are stressed. This image of the U.S. continues today. Is it any wonder that Japanese trade negotiators seem surprised that a nation like the U.S. feels economically threatened by Japan? These images die hard, but they can be used to help enhance historical and cultural understanding.

3. Ask students to examine values implicit in certain practices of Japanese society. This can be a key to greater understanding of the Japanese people and their society. Much has been written about the Japanese education system, but values inherent in that system usually are not stressed. For example, we hear that Japanese children greatly respect their teachers and that in general, respect for learning is fostered. What is the importance of this value in later life and how does it manifest itself? Japan has one of the highest literacy rates in the world and a reputation for the painstaking collection of data. Similarly, we hear that Japanese children clean their own school and often maintain the grounds. Perhaps this early training leads to the much touted Japanese work ethic. Is it any wonder that labor productivity has increased 80% in Japan in the past decades while in the U.S. it has increased by only 15%? A careful study of the values inherent in Japanese institutions provides insights into contemporary society and also provides a mirror for examining our own society.

4. Introduce the Japanese language. Many students never learn that other languages employ different alphabets, let alone syllabaries or ideographs. There are a number of useful introductory units on the Japanese language. They train students in proper pronunciation of terms and, more importantly, introduce them to a language that reflects historical realities. Chinese influence is seen in the Kanji (ideographs) and western impact is reflected in the use of romaji (Roman characters or western alphabet). But perhaps the biggest reward gained is a demystification of the Japanese language. Most students have no idea how to even approach the language. It is sometimes described as "chicken scratch" and relegated to the realm of meaningless babble. It is difficult to respect or understand a cuiture that seems to have an entirely meaningless way of communication. Taking some time to emphasize the language will reap rich rewards in later lessons.

Where Does Japan Belong in the Curriculum? Teaching about Japan is appropriate at every level of the curriculum and in virtually any subject. Fortunately, many excellent materials are available.

At the elementary level there are exciting trunk kits and artifact boxes that entice students into historical investigation as well as exploration of contemporary culture. Japanese festivals can be studied and celebrated through books, films, artifacts, and craft kits. Reading materials can be supplemented with children's literature about Japan. Care should be taken that selections are not limited to folktales. A steady diet of folktales can lead to the misperception that all foreign cultures are quite bizarre and locked in a time warp.

Some schools have had success with grade-wide or school-wide fairs focusing on foreign cultures, including Japan. Students are often eager to display their acumen to peers, younger or older students, and even parents or teachers. A community-wide fair focusing on Japan is an excellent way to involve Japanese nationals in cross-cultural learning and increased understanding. Demonstrations, discussions, displays, lectures, and specialized classes can all be part of this endeavor.

A study of Japan is particularly appropriate in geography classes. In comparison to the United States, Japan is roughly the size of Montana, has about half the population (121 million), is about 80% mountainous, and has little in the way of natural resources. The story of how the Japanese produce one-tenth of the world's gross product while living on one-fourth of 1% of the world's land is a fascinating geography lesson.

All of the teaching suggestions mentioned here are pragmatic. They can be carried out through materials that are readily available and listed in the bibliography below. Together these resources can help enhance teaching about Japan, remove stereotypes, and prepare students to understand the growing significance of the Pacific Rim in world affairs.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304.

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