

Bloomfield Middle School Narrative – Suzanne Johnson and Jody Sutula

This essay was written by Suzanne Johnson and Jody Sutula, delegates to China from Bloomfield Middle School in Bloomfield, New Jersey. Ms. Johnson and Ms. Sutula were pilot site educators for the original Story of Movies program surrounding TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (1962, d. Richard Mulligan).

Teaching can be a very isolating, lonely profession. Budget and scheduling constraints, testing demands, and long-standing traditions have made it extremely difficult for most teachers to maintain the level of professional development critical to being strong, effective educators. Far too often teachers are restricted to their classrooms, and the students who pass through their doors each day are, therefore, limited to what can be learned within the confines of that room.

The Story of Movies curriculum, in and of itself, creates a learning experience that opens that often-closed door of learning. The standards-based, interdisciplinary design encourages collegiality amongst educators while at the same time utilizing technology and visual learning techniques that are commonly ignored in the typical classroom setting. As a result, it has been a pleasure working with the SOM curriculum and our eyes have been truly “opened” to the world beyond our classroom doors.

So when we were asked to take part in a cultural exchange in China to further our understanding of the cultural significance of film, we jumped at the chance. It is an understatement to say that an opportunity to travel to China is a rarity in the world of public education. Our excitement was incredible as we not only firmly believed in the SOM curriculum that we would be representing, but we also knew that we would return to our classes better suited to effectively inspire and educate our students.

Our purpose as educators on this journey was to serve as representative educators of the Story of Movies curriculum, and to be observers while offering practical analysis of Chinese education practices. We knew heading into this task that we had been offered a part in a one-of-a-kind experience, but we had no idea how far-reaching that experience would prove to be.

Our relationship with the Chinese educators began at our Welcome Buffet. We were seated with educators from Shanghai University, East Urban High School, and Xie Tang Primary School. This allowed us time to break the ice and get to know one another in a casual setting. During the dinner we discussed film curricula in our respective schools and ways we have engaged students in the learning process. We also had the opportunity to “talk shop” with the Chinese educators. Since teachers seldom have the chance to just discuss happenings in the classroom, this rare opportunity was made all the more wonderful as the stories being shared crossed cultural lines. We came away from the meal realizing how many similarities our students share. Overall this introductory dinner was an important aspect of the exchange and would be a beneficial activity when the Chinese contingent visits the United States.

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The following day we traveled to East Urban High School. There we met with the same educators from the dinner and were introduced to more staff members. Upon our arrival, we were brought to the school's museum and given a tour by student guides. It was wonderful to be given the chance to meet the students and allow them the opportunity to shine. They proudly showed us around the museum and provided anecdotes and facts about the school's history. We were impressed with the professional manner in which the museum was presented; it was apparent that this is a source of pride for the school. Immediately we began to discuss how we could incorporate a museum into our school. Just like any school, we have had activities that we are proud of and why not show them off? The students' sense of pride in their school was reinforced by the displays in the room.

After our tour, we went to a classroom where students and teachers gathered to exchange ideas. The students were given a general introduction to The Story of Movies curriculum by Cathy Gourley, the program's curriculum writer, and then participated in some of the lessons. The students were quick to volunteer answers. Through their responses we were able to see how film does speak a universal language; their answers were on target and their insight met the high standards that are in place throughout the curriculum. Furthermore, the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* presented the opportunity for a powerful discussion on race relations. The high school students were fascinated with race relations in America and our country's civil rights history. They wanted to know how we felt about the way whites treat blacks, since we in the American delegation were all white. They were interested in ways our students assimilate in a classroom in which many races are present. Beyond the curriculum, the film opened up a dialogue that is crucial for this generation as they go out to make their mark in the world. Furthermore, we appreciated the value of having the filmmakers and preservationists as part of the discussion. They brought an element to the class that teachers cannot provide.

Student involvement is an integral part of the exchange. When the Chinese teachers come to our school, we would like to have our middle school students prepared. Whether it is by using the SOM curriculum or viewing a Chinese film, it will be beneficial to this part of the program if our students have some background knowledge. The high school students in China screened the film which helped with the level of their responses.

The final leg of the exchange dealing directly with education was our visit to Xie Tang Primary School. A festive welcoming committee greeted our arrival. Students holding American and Chinese flags sang out a welcome, while the school band played along. Like at the high school, we were immediately introduced to student tour guides, who brought us all around the campus. We went to various buildings and rooms where we observed students engaging in different activities – dance, music, art, writing, TV production, and design. The entire tour ran very smoothly thanks to our student leaders. They kept our group moving and provided information on what we were

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watching. Once again it was apparent that the students took great pride in their school and had practiced for this special day. This part of the program was wonderful for us, because we were able to see students in action. There is no better way for teachers to understand how a school works.

Following our tour, we were honored to be part of the opening ceremony for the Xie Jin Movies Museum. Members of the community were present for this event and it was obvious that we were playing a part in this school's history. After the ceremony we remained in the museum where we held a Story of Movies session with the older primary students. Again we were very impressed with the students' command of film language. They were engaged in the lessons and their responses were well thought out. Following the lessons with the students, there was some time to exchange ideas with the teachers at the school. Of course we could have stayed the rest of the day sharing ideas! We feel that we left the school with some new ideas, and hopefully provided their staff with information that they may use in the future.

In summation, we are happy to report that our experience with The Film Foundation's cultural exchange program in China was profoundly educational and inspiring. By far the events with the greatest impact were those that involved the visitation of the schools. The level of intellectual interaction in which the students of all ages engaged us was incredible. Clearly, they want to get to know us as much as we want to know them. One particularly impressive element of the schools in Shanghai and Shangyu was their ability to celebrate themselves. We saw firsthand the power that school pride has on teaching and learning. As a result, we have already begun discussions about the formation of a school museum that would model that of the one we toured at East Urban High School.

We are still reeling from the experience, as we have been busy sharing our slide shows with fellow educators, students, family, friends and the community at large. The pictures alone have generated incredible responses that prove the desire for further understanding of unfamiliar cultures. Throughout our interaction with these groups in the US, we have noticed a constant in their response. Of course there is the initial excitement over our participation in the film screenings and director's forums. Yet, time and again, the audiences want to know more about the Chinese schools and students. Just as we experienced through the questioning we received from the students in China, people are curious to understand the daily intricacies of life in another culture. Our peers and students were amazed to see that there are so many similarities between students in China and students in America. Trendy hairstyles, sports jerseys, and Nike sneakers were just a few of the visual indicators of the commonalities amongst teens worldwide. However, our slide show audiences were also very quick to point out the more subtle differences. Everything from the required tracksuit school uniforms to the use of motorbikes as school transportation became sparks for in-depth discussion of how daily life impacts learning.

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So how do we gain a better understanding of the history and traditions that have led to these similarities and differences that exist between American and Chinese cultures? The reaction to the images presented in our slide show clearly point to the next medium: Chinese film. As we know, a picture is worth a thousand words, so to extrapolate, moving images are invaluable! We greatly look forward to furthering our knowledge as we explore and study the films suggested by the Chinese students themselves.

As we prepare for the second part of our exchange, we are already learning from the necessary introspection required in properly hosting a visit by the Chinese delegation. We feel truly blessed to have been a part of such an amazing adventure and cannot wait for the adventure to continue.