

# History + English + Humanities = Critical, Creative, Global Thinkers

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In our high school of about 1,300 students, many sophomores took traditional English II and world history classes at the same time. In English class, students would learn the background of the time period before studying a work of literature. In history class, they learned to use research skills and write papers utilizing supporting evidence and effective structure. As English and history teachers, we realized that not only were we teaching many of the same students, but we were also focusing on, even repeating, similar content in both of our classes. We began discussing the possibility of team teaching our classes, intentionally planning together, and designing a curriculum that combined history and English/language arts content and skills. We could organize the class to have an arts and humanities theme that would provide continuity and promote higher level thinking for the students. The result was a world history/world literature class with this overarching theme: Literature and the arts (art, drama, and music) reflect the culture and time period in which they were created.

## The Plan — Making it Happen

*Consulting the standards.* Once we had a tentative theme for the class, our first task was consulting the standards for both social studies and English/language arts. Because of the nature of the world history content and standards, it made sense to organize the class chronologically following the scope and sequence of the world history narrative.<sup>1</sup> While national common core reading standards were not available when we taught this class, as we looked at the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, this curriculum addressed all of the standards.<sup>2</sup> Our state had standards in both contents as well, so those were integrated into the course structure.<sup>3</sup> Local curriculum guidelines also influenced our choice of literature; for instance,

*To Kill A Mockingbird* did not exactly reflect world history content standards, but all sophomores were expected to read this novel. Thus, the novel became a mini-unit related to twentieth-century topics and discrimination.

*Designing the curriculum.* Once the big content topics and skills were identified, we began developing curriculum units. As we planned a chronological curriculum from the Cradles of Civilization through the Twentieth Century, we chose examples of literature, art, and music that reflected both the time period and the culture. For example, as we introduced the Renaissance unit, we not only included the politics of the Italian city-states, but we read excerpts from Machiavelli's *The Prince* and analyzed da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*. After

studying events in twentieth century Russian history, we explored Orwell's *Animal Farm* as an allegory.

*Launching the class.* With a rigorous curriculum linked to standards that incorporated research-based strategies, we approached the administration for class approval. With the condition that the students got both history and English credits, the course was accepted. Since our high school schedule was a 4×4 block, the class met for the entire year. In a traditional six- or seven-period day schedule, the class would need to be two periods. The next step was recruiting students. Marketing included visiting freshman classes and sending informational materials home to parents. That fall, we welcomed 100 students, which made up two class sections. Although 50 students per class may seem daunting, we now had a double room and two teachers. The larger space allowed room for grouping and regrouping based on the needs, interests, and abilities of the students. Although the school had already adopted a world history text, world literature had never been taught, so we chose Prentice Hall's *World Masterpieces* along with supplemental texts. The following is a sample unit overview of Imperialism in Africa and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.<sup>4</sup>

## Sample Unit: Africa, Imperialism, and *Things Fall Apart*

*Why this unit?* In keeping with our goal of integrating arts/humanities and also examining multiple perspectives in the study of world history, we were challenged with how to teach the nineteenth century. The overwhelming amount of content (five chapters in the text focusing on Europe, Asia, Africa, the United States) created challenges for students to comprehend the big ideas. After consulting standards, we chose to teach the nineteenth century as a collection of movements, i.e., the Age of “Isms,” that occurred throughout the world. The textbook content on imperialism read like a list of which European country colonized where and why it was successful. Being disappointed with the history textbook’s treatment of imperialism, we opted to choose one country that was affected by European colonization and do an in-depth study of the clash of those two cultures. We chose to focus on Nigeria and use Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as the piece of literature that reflected the “other side” of imperialism in Africa.

**Historical Perspective:** *Things Fall Apart* depicts traditional village life among the Ibo (also referred to as Igbo) people of Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century and shows the developing conflicts as European colonization began in the area. In order to fully develop students’ understanding of imperialism, we considered it necessary to teach a thorough background of the Ibo culture of Nigeria, including government, religion, clan system, economy, music, dance, and rituals. (See Table 1 for background information about the Ibo culture.) The history lessons focused on the geographical features and natural resources of Africa as a continent, and then specifically Nigeria. We used maps to show the diverse peoples of Nigeria and to introduce the Ibo culture. Discussions on the meanings and

purposes of imperialism from a European point of view set the stage for the novel that was to follow.

**Literary Perspective:** After the historical background of Nigeria was established and students had a basic understanding of the concept of imperialism, we introduced the novel. To lay the groundwork for the discussion of the work itself, we presented Chinua Achebe’s background—a Nigerian novelist and essayist who focuses on the Ibo culture and the clashes between cultures due to imperialism. Students reflected on the content of the book in a guided reading log. Class discussions included detailed analyses of the literary elements in *Things Fall Apart*. Some guiding questions included the following: Why would Achebe tell the story of Okonkwo, village leader and warrior, who strives to maintain his tribal ways when confronted by imperialism and missionaries? What were the motives for British colonization in Nigeria? Was *Things Fall Apart* a tragedy? Was Okonkwo a tragic hero? How did the Ibos protest? What does the title of the book mean?

### Assessment Plan:

**Preassessment:** Although we had a general plan for the imperialism unit, we preassessed students to determine prior knowledge and understanding. Before we began the unit, students answered these open-ended questions: (1) Describe the impact European imperialism had on Africa. (2) How does Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* exemplify this impact? Since we cannot teach students concepts and content they already know,<sup>5</sup> students who were able to answer these questions proficiently explored imperialism in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* independently. Using a Bloom chart, stu-

### National Standards

NCSS Themes:

- CULTURE
- TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

*National Standards for World History*—Era 7: An Age of Revolutions 1750–1914:

- Patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic domination, 1800–1914
- Major global trends from 1750–1914

*Common Core Standards for English Language Arts:*

- Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States.
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

dents were able to self select a task that not only challenged them, but also allowed them to discuss the same concepts as the rest of the class but with new content.<sup>6</sup> We also used Developing and Assessing Products (DAP) Tools to encourage high quality products.<sup>7</sup>

**Formative:** As Carol Ann Tomlinson wrote, “Assessment is today’s means of understanding how to modify tomorrow’s instruction.”<sup>8</sup> In order to meet children’s needs, interests, and abilities, we assessed throughout units, then modified those units accordingly. We incorporated several formative assessments. Students kept reading logs, where they jotted down thoughts and questions or answered specific prompts about the novel. We also had students complete exit slips that focused on the big idea question of the day. From reading quizzes to participation in classroom discussions, there were multiple opportunities for us to assess student understanding.

**Summative:** In addition to an essay on the content, students chose one assessment product from a Think-Tac-Toe menu to present on “Ibo Day.” (See Table 2) Students showed their masks, demonstrated Ibo musical instruments, ate Nigerian food, and shared their writings about the novel. “Ibo Day” turned out to be a stimulating way to end the unit and

Table 1: **Background Information—Culture of the Ibos**

### Archaeological information

Archaeological information discovered about the Ibo culture has been found in eastern, central Nigeria and dated to the ninth century A.D. Artifacts discovered are as follows: remains of a store-house and burial chamber, clay pots, bronze objects, iron weapons, implements, pottery vessels, glass and quartz beads, copper wire, elephant tusks, bone fragments, a skull, and twenty-two textile specimens.

### Traditional Ibo religious beliefs

- Ani—Earth goddess and owner of all land in Iboland. All crops are dedicated to her. A Week of Peace is held so crops will grow. She is the source of fertility, the judge of morality, and has the most influence on people's lives. Offenses against Ani result in abominations; immediate punishment for individual offenses is required or Ani will punish the whole clan.
- Chukwu—Maker of heaven and earth. All other gods are his messengers and do his work.
- Chi—Generic word for god. As one's own personal deity, it becomes established when a child is old enough to become his own person.
- Agbala—Oracle of the hills and caves
- A variety of lesser gods that serve and represent the higher gods

### Rituals

- New Yam Festival—honors the earth goddess and celebrates the harvest. All cooking utensils must be purified.
- Rituals to commemorate first appearance of a mask
- Ritual cleansing—punishment such as burning houses or crops for committing a crime such as killing a clansman
- Marriage—3 phases
  1. Setting of the bride price—Money from the groom's family is paid to the bride's family. Bargaining is done using broomsticks to add dignity to the occasion.
  2. Uri—The bride's extended visit with the groom's family
  3. Isa-ifi—The acceptance of the bride into the husband's family. She is questioned regarding her behavior since the arrangement was proposed.
- Burial—Includes two separate burials. The first is ceremonial and occurs soon after death. Between the first and second burial, the deceased's spirit roamed restlessly and could not return home. The second burial involves feasting and ceremonies so that the spirit can rejoin the household.

### Clan system

The clan is composed of villages that consist of several lineages. A lineage is composed of paternal families along with dead ancestors and all the local gods.

Money system—The cowrie is a mollusk shell approximately ½ inch long. Cowries were collected in strings of six. One bag contained approximately 24,000 cowries and weighed approximately 60 pounds. Ten strings of cowrie (60 shells) equaled half of an English penny in 1910. A bag of cowries then equaled approximately one English pound.

### Food

Yams

Plantains—related to the common banana but larger; usually cooked green

Cassava—root vegetable that grows in soil too poor for yams

Foo foo—mushy, sticky base for meat, fish, or vegetable soup; usually eaten with fingers and made from yams or cassava

Palm oil—cooked for soup and used as a cooking base; used for soaps, lamps, cosmetics (Europeans wanted it to lubricate machines.)

Kola—caffeine-rich fruit, like coffee. The fruit has 3–4 lobes that are broken into pieces, and guests usually break the kola symbolizing the bond between host and guest.

### Government

Based on checks and balances. A council of elders called the egwugwu dispenses justice by using discussion and consensus. Punishment can involve religious sanctions by the group.

### British government organization in Africa

Warrant chiefs—This position was created based on the British idea that all Africans were ruled by chiefs. Individuals chosen for this position were given warrants to sit on native courts. These men cooperated with the British and often became notorious for their corruption and exploitation.

Court clerks—These men were usually well-educated, kept court records, and served summons.

### Growth of Christianity in Iboland

The first Christian to enter Ibo territory was Simon Jonas in 1841. He was an Ibo that had been sold into slavery, rescued, and returned to preach to the Ibo children.

The first permanent mission was established in 1857 by Rev. John Christopher Taylor.

In 1885, two Catholic congregations were established in Iboland: the Society of African Missions in the west and the Holy Ghost Fathers in the east.

In 1888, the first Presbyterian mission was established in Iboland.

The majority of the original Ibo converts to Christianity were the poor, needy, or those rejected by society (e.g., mothers of twins or lepers). However, gradually wealthy members of society began to join.

### Enrollment statistics

1900—Society of African Missions: 446; Holy Ghost Fathers: 1,322

The 1921 census claimed that 284,835 out of 3,927,419 Ibo were Christians. The largest denomination was Catholic.

The 1931 census claimed that out of the total Ibo (3,172,789) 253,378 were Protestants and 94,049 were Catholics.

### Ibo resistance to imperialism

- Military resistance—The problems of military resistance were resources (arms and ammunition) and scale. The British Empire had troops, arms (rifles and machine guns), and ammunition. The Ibo fought with cap guns, dane guns, machetes, and occasional rifles. The British also recruited large numbers of Africans to fight for them.
  - Non-military resistance
  - Supernatural modes of defense (depending on gods and curses)
  - Manipulation—playing tricks with the language and customs. Africans knew that the British despised groups stopping trade, levying tolls, raiding for slaves, and human sacrifices. By accusing their enemies of these practices, the Ibo could often manipulate the British to fight local wars for them.
  - Imposters—A few Africans who learned to speak and read English posted as court messengers.

**Sources for Background Information – Culture of the Ibos**  
 Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 1976.  
 Mwabara, S.N. *Igboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860-1960* (London: Humanities Press), 1977.  
 Ogbalau, F. Chidozie. *Igbo Language and Culture* (Nigeria: University Press), 1984.  
 Wren, Robert. *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels* (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press), 1980

Table 2: **Think-Tac-Toe: Imperialism and *Things Fall Apart***

Religion and Government	As Mr. Brown, compose letters to your superior in Europe explaining what you have learned. Explain why an aggressive attack is not the best way to win converts.	Explain the purpose behind Ibo masks. Design a mask that reflects those values.	Okonkwo is on trial for murder of Ikemefuna. Outline a defense strategy for him based on Ibo customs. Present your opening argument.
Ibo Family and Daily Life	Write a week's journal entries from the point of view of one of Okonkwo's wives. Explore feelings and lifestyle.	Create a children's book that illustrates clan life in an Ibo village (e.g. clan wedding, village meeting, tapping a palm tree, etc.)	Choose an event in Okonkwo's life to be the basis of an Ibo legend. Compose the legend expressing Ibo values and point of view. This real event may be embellished with imaginary elements.
Art, Music, and Tradition	Create a photo montage (drawings, photos, pictures) that illustrates "The Ibo Dream."	Prepare a Nigerian or West African food. When sharing the food, explain the cultural and economic importance of the food.	Research African music and instruments focusing on their use in the clan. Create a sample instrument and explain its influence on modern music.

allow students choices in demonstrating their knowledge of the material. Students, both those who read Achebe and those who read Conrad, used the Developing and Assessing Products Tools as they developed their products. After completion, we used the DAP Tools to assess the products.<sup>9</sup>

**Strategies/Activities:**

- Label map of Africa including countries, geographical features, and natural resources;
- Introductory PowerPoint presentation on the Ibo culture with pictures and artifacts;
- Discussion of literary elements with graphic organizers: setting, plot, character, theme, and conflict;
- Small group activity—Analyzing Ibo folktales and proverbs imbedded in the novel;
- Compare/contrast graphic organizer—British vs. Ibo culture;
- Class debate on the following question: Was British imperialism good or bad for Nigeria?
- Creation of African masks illustrating elements of Ibo culture;
- "Ibo Day."

**Importance of Global Learning for Today's Students**

Today's schools and teachers are challenged with meeting the demands of specific content standards, high stakes assessment, and developing students from diverse backgrounds to be capable of competing in a global market. These twenty-first century students must not only possess critical thinking skills and the ability to process information, but also have an awareness and appreciation of global citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Heidi Hayes Jacobs explains the concept and importance of global learning as knowing "other world regions, cultures, economies, and global issues" and developing the "values of respect for other cultures and the disposition to engage responsibly as an actor in the global context."<sup>11</sup> Through the creation of a class that combined both social studies and language arts with a humanities emphasis, hopefully our goal of developing students with this "global disposition" was achieved. 🌐

**Notes**

1. National Center for History in the Schools, National Standards for History, 1996.
2. Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and

- Technical Subjects" (2010), [www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards).
3. Kentucky Department of Education, "Combined Curriculum Document 2006" (2010), [www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Instructional+Resources/Curriculum+Documents+and+Resources/Teaching+Tools/Combined+Curriculum+Documents/default.htm](http://www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Instructional+Resources/Curriculum+Documents+and+Resources/Teaching+Tools/Combined+Curriculum+Documents/default.htm).
4. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958).
5. Julian Stanley, "Helping Students Learn What They Don't Already Know Psychology," *Public Policy and Law* 47, (2000): 216-222.
6. Julia L. Roberts and Tracy F. Inman, *Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom*, 2nd Ed. (Waco, Tex.: Prufrock Press, 2009).
7. Roberts and Inman, *Assessing Differentiated Student Products* (Waco, Tex.: Prufrock Press, 2009).
8. Tomlinson, Carol Ann, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999), 10.
9. Roberts and Inman, *Assessing Differentiated Student Products*.
10. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "Framework for 21st Century Learning" (2004), <http://p21.org/overview/skills-framework>.
11. Heidi Hayes Jacobs, *Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2010), 102.

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