

Silk Roads: China, The Middle East, and the New World

Hirsh Diamant and Char Simons
Evergreen State College

Introduction

In developing Silk Roads Studies at Evergreen State College, we defined Silk Roads not as a specific geographic location, or a place in time, but as a metaphor for cultural transfusion and a network of trade routes from early history to the present day. A website for the program is at: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/silkroads/06/>

Throughout history, the same roads were used to reach other lands and cultures by both conquerors and merchants. Our Silk Roads program focused on peace as a medium for cultural development and transfusion.

As early as the 5th century BCE, Confucius expressed the importance of experiential learning in his famous aphorism: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Our study acquired meaning when theory and practice were bridged, and community service became an important goal of our program.

The variety of projects and lesson plans developed by Silk Roads students in their K-12 community service were inspiring. Here are some examples:

- Shapes and colors in Islamic art (grades K-1)
- Origami and felt cutouts of animals on Silk Roads: camels, horses, yaks, sheep, etc. (grades 9-12)
- Dance, drumming, and costumes on Silk Roads (grade 6)
- Feng Shui and a field trip to a local Japanese garden (grades K-5)
- Portrait and landscape in Renaissance, Chinese, and Islamic art (grades 9-12)
- Pottery in China and on Silk Roads (grades 9-12)
- Masks and puppets on the Silk Roads, in China, and in Turkey (grades 4-5)

- Drawing lessons on dragons and dragonflies (grade 4)
- Puppets and Silk Roads stories, (grades 10-12)
- Japanese calligraphy and Haiku (grade 4)
- Tai Ji and Chinese calligraphy (grades 10-12)

All students in the program worked on the following:

- a New Year Peace exhibit (grades K-12 and community workshops)
- a Lunar Spring Festival (Evergreen, SPSCC, and the community)
- Three liberal arts forums on Identity
- a Silk Roads Anthology (including students’ and scholars’ writings on Identity and Travel)

A Year Long Program of Study and Travel

In planning this year-long program we developed a foundation in the historical and geographic understanding of the Silk Roads during the fall quarter. In the winter quarter, we focused on cultural diffusion and arts on historic and contemporary Silk Roads. The focus of the spring quarter was on travel as a peace-making activity.

A final component of our year-long study of the Silk Roads was to “go on the road.” Faculty led a total of 36 students and community members, ranging in age from 12 to 79, on study tours of China, Turkey and Jordan. Silk Roads students unable to travel internationally did their own explorations of the main program themes—identity and the transmission and transformation of culture—on their own and closer to home. In our journeys, we met with students, educators, writers, artists, musicians, community activists, environmentalists, religious and tribal

leaders, journalists and politicians. We also experienced valuable meandering time when serendipity leads one to meet enlightening people and engage in conversations that help to deepen our understanding of identity and culture. Some of the fruits of those experiences, whether at a temple in China, the desert of Jordan, or the scrublands of eastern Washington, can be found in this anthology.”¹

In retrospect, it was a rich and fulfilling year of academic study and collegial work. The highlights included in particular the three academic forums on Identity, the Lunar Spring Festival, a forum on Self Cultivation with scholars, a New Year Peace show and the creation of its website, Peace Workshops in the community, the production of the Silk Roads Anthology of Identity and Travel, and the three-week travel and study experience with students in China.

During the 07-08 academic year I am teaching the program Children and Education; a Silk Roads Perspective. My goal is to examine approaches in progressive education both here and abroad and look at non-western approaches to education. There will also be an opportunity for students to travel and study in China in March of 2008 for 3 weeks.

Other possible community outreach programs may include developing a New Year Silk Roads exhibit in the Evergreen State College Library, a Lunar Spring Festival on January 26, 2008; liberal arts forums on Ethics, Myths and Education; and Community Sacred Arts workshops with Tibetan monks in April 2008.

Endnote

¹From Char Simons’ *Introduction to Silk Roads Anthology*. A PDF copy of the Anthology is at <http://www2.evergreen.edu/silkroads/final-version-of-anthology>