

Afghanistan in Poetry, Literature, and Nonfiction Texts

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Overview

This unit is intended for high school students, particularly 9th graders, to be implemented in English 1 class. It is meant to build reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, the content being linked by a common subject: the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, its effects in Afghanistan itself, and the similarities and differences that exist between American and Afghan culture. The unit begins with some background building, using reference materials to illuminate basic facts about Afghanistan, its culture, and the history of the conflict there. Following are some classroom activities that will engage students in exploring the differences of perspective between Afghans and Americans. Students will participate in a screening of, *Afghan Star*, a very intriguing documentary about a popular *American-Idol* style television show in Afghanistan. Following the film, they will read poems by Afghan and American poets about Afghanistan, to build poetry reading skills and explore contrasting points of view. The last two activities in the unit relate to reading and understanding narrative texts about Afghanistan, both nonfiction and fiction. Students will read sections of the first chapter of Dexter Filkins' book *The Forever War* and participate in activities related to *Kite Runner*, the bestselling 2003 novel by Khaled Hosseini. The Kite Runner activities can provide closure to the unit because they enable students to display the full body of knowledge they have acquired over the course of the unit.

The goal of this unit is to build skills using content that is relevant and engaging, and for this reason I have chosen this particular set of texts and the timely topic of modern Afghanistan. By participating in the wide variety of activities contained in this unit, my

overall hope is that students will come away from this learning experience with reinforcement in several key skill areas, plus knowledge of a topic that is often in the news but little understood. Students will improve their ability to comprehend a variety of texts: reference materials, newspaper articles, nonfiction essays, and fictional works. The activities contain various types of writing prompts as formative assessments, providing students an opportunity to improve their written expression. By working in groups and making informal presentations to their classmates, students will engage in team-building skills as well as become more confident in speaking extemporaneously to a group of their peers.

Rationale

It seems that the conflict in Afghanistan is not going to be over any time soon, yet very little about its culture is understood by the average American, let alone the average high school student. Although it is quite possible that our students, or their family members, will spend time serving in Afghanistan, little to no classroom time is devoted to developing an understanding of Afghan history or culture, or discussing the reasons why our government sees fit to devote massive resources to fighting there.

One World History textbook I came across mentioned nothing about Afghanistan, other than the fact that it was occupied by the USSR during a few years in the context of the Cold War. Other textbooks (particularly the one used by the School District of Philadelphia for World History, published by Holt) devote a handful of pages to this issue. History textbooks vary widely, as do teachers' approaches to covering areas and issues of the day; however, it stands to reason that if a given concept, event, idea, or issue cannot be found in the textbook, it will not be covered by the teacher if the teacher does not depart from the standard prescribed curriculum.

In a broader sense, 21st century teens demonstrate a lack of interest in, or knowledge of, current events that are happening beyond their own backyards, even though these same events could have a great impact on their future. This state of affairs is particularly troublesome to me, as I believe one of my duties as an educator is to show my students how to be lifelong learners who contribute positively to the world as fully participating citizens. Therefore, it seems fitting to effect change by developing a curricular unit that would educate high school students about Afghan culture and our country's involvement in conflicts there.

In keeping with the mission and vision of High School of the Future, where we are dedicated to project-based interdisciplinary learning that allows our learners to become citizens making positive contributions to their communities through active participation, I have co-planned this unit with Kathleen Ayers, World History educator. Although our units can be implemented independently in English 1 and World History (both are 9th grade core subject classes), they are intended to be taught concurrently. In order to help

our students build lifelong learning skills through deepening their awareness of pertinent current events and issues surrounding Afghan culture, we have developed intertwined curricular units that include nonfiction information texts, current news articles, a recent HBO documentary, and activities centered on discussing a novel (*Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini).

Ultimately, we want students to come away with an “ear pricked” towards Afghanistan and perhaps a little bit of interest in Afghanistan’s role (whether direct or indirect) in their lives. I notice for myself that if I’m studying or learning about something, I tend to notice how often it crosses my path (in the news, for example) and the more I learn, the more my interest in that topic grows. I want to generate interest in my students so that they become more curious and perhaps start to learn on their own. We hope that this unit captures their imaginations and their interest in this very relevant current topic.

Unit Objectives

Students will be able to demonstrate understanding and mastery of the concepts covered in this unit on Afghanistan if they can accomplish the objectives listed and described below.

One of the more general objectives in this unit is to develop baseline cultural awareness. Students need to know where Afghanistan is located, what different ethnic groups populate the country, how religion plays an important role in daily life, the context of modern Afghanistan in terms of the Afghan-Soviet War, and the effects of the Taliban. We will accomplish this objective throughout the unit, but most of the work towards this objective will happen early on in the unit.

As educators know, much of learning is done through compare and contrast. Throughout this unit, we will do a great deal of comparison of cultures and lifestyles. By learning about Afghan culture through poetry, film, nonfiction, and fiction texts, students will gain an understanding of the vast differences between our two societies. Through examining the texts contained in this unit, students will get glimpses into the macro- and micro-level similarities and differences between these cultures. For example, through viewing and discussing *Afghan Star* they will see not only the daily lives of Afghan citizens, but they will also notice how different the media is in Afghanistan, and how large a role religion plays in what is and is not acceptable public behavior. Exploring a different culture will give students much insight into their own.

In addition, students will be reading and evaluating poetry written by various Afghan poets belonging to a variety of ethnic groups, plus poetry written by American soldiers serving in Afghanistan. As they read this poetry, they will be able to describe the way one’s cultural heritage affects the way one perceives the world. They will also gain

practice with reading aloud, identifying literary terms, and comprehending poetry. They might also make the surprising discovery that although each culture is unique, there are common threads that run throughout humanity. To wrap up this segment of the unit, students will write a poem from a perspective of their choice, in order to gain confidence with exploring point of view.

In his book *The Forever War*, journalist Dexter Filkins illustrated the impact of longstanding war on the collective psyche of a culture by explaining the behaviors of the Afghan people and how they behave in reaction to conflict. Reading excerpts from this text, students will be able to evaluate this impact. As a text-to-text connection, the selection from *The Forever War* has some direct parallels with important events in *Kite Runner*, specifically, the behavior of the Taliban and their violent actions in Ghazi stadium in Kabul.

The final culminating activity of this unit is a series of activities centered on the novel *Kite Runner*. These activities enable readers to examine some broad themes of the novel, form personal connections, and think about the text in new and different ways. Also, this activity gives students the opportunity to bring into the mix things that they learned in previous activities. The activity (actually, a set of activities) ends with students displaying their work to others, so this is a nice time to step back and reflect on how the unit has gone overall.

In terms of planning and scheduling, my recommendation is to implement the lessons included in this unit at various points during a reading of *Kite Runner*, using the last activity in the unit as a way to wrap-up other discussions of the novel that are happening. Additionally, I strongly encourage any instructor who chooses to implement these lessons to pair my unit with the unit from the same TIP Seminar (Modern Middle East, facilitated in Spring 2010 by Professor Eve Troutt Powell) created by Kathleen Ayers, as we developed the content as an interdisciplinary team.

Strategies

The teaching strategies I use in my classroom stem from a few key beliefs I hold about how students learn best. First, I hold the belief that students learn best when they are allowed to build on their prior knowledge—what they bring to the table—to create new knowledge. At the start of any activity that holds true to this belief, there should be some kind of activity where students are asked what they already know. For the purposes of this unit, I have built into each set of classroom activities opportunities for students to recall what they already know about a concept.

Secondly, I believe in making content relevant to students through explicitly addressing a few key questions during class: “Why are we learning this?”, “How does this relate to my everyday life?”, “How does this connect to what I’m doing in my other

classes?”, and “How does this relate to our overall goals for this class?” Students have a right to ask these questions, and we teachers owe it to them to be able to justify everything we are asking them to do. In introducing this unit, I will certainly share with my students the ideas discussed in the rationale above.

Thirdly, I believe in the power and the ability of today’s high school students to be in charge of their own learning. In my teaching experience, I have observed that the overwhelming majority of students, when given choices, opt to challenge themselves appropriately. Ultimately, they end up making choices that challenge them enough so they aren’t bored, while ensuring their success by being within their grasp. With all the current emphasis on differentiating instruction based on the abilities and strengths of students, empowering them to make their own choices is a way to work with a variety of different learning levels in one classroom. To ensure that students are given choice, is why I included a culminating activity built upon students formulating their own research question and then seeking out answers.

All that being said, the strategies I am using in this unit are built upon the ideas discussed above. One strategy I plan to use extensively is small-group discussions and learning engagements, using mixed-ability groups of 3-5 students. This strategy has several advantages. It puts the learning in the hands of the students, allowing them to bounce ideas off each other and more effectively activate their prior knowledge. Especially in classes where there is a diversity of ability among the students, groups allow for the students who learn at a lower instructional level to be helped along by their peers at higher instructional levels. Several of the activities contained in this unit are built on the foundation of small group work.

Using media wisely is another important and useful strategy which has brought me much success in the classroom. Oftentimes, teachers are perceived as lazy if they show videos as part of their instructional program; however, this criticism shows an ignorance of the state of learning today. Students in the 21st century learn extremely well by viewing and responding to video, being that the majority of them are visual and/or audio-visual learners. I believe that given something to do while watching a video—answering guided questions is my chosen activity—keeps the students busy while enabling the teacher to guide the thinking of the class without much interruption or interference. After viewing a video, a short discussion (facilitated by the teacher, but with most of the contributions coming from students) can help clarify any tough concepts for those who need a little extra help, while allowing for a student-centered review of the more general ideas presented in the video.

Another important strategy is the use of current events to build reading skills, and that is a built-in asset of a unit on the conflict in Afghanistan. Although the lessons contain instructional materials that are current to the time when this unit was written (Spring of 2010), I encourage instructors who implement this unit in the future to use articles that

are more current, adjusting the lesson as necessary. The overall strategy and objectives can be fulfilled no matter what text is used.

I also believe that poetry is a very powerful tool in that just a few words can say so much. Struggling readers, as many of my students are, are often reluctant to tackle long fiction or nonfiction passages because they are afraid of not understanding or not having the stamina; in fact, prose can be extremely daunting to them and bring back unpleasant memories of standardized testing or other things that induce boredom. But many times, I have seen these very same readers approach poetry willingly and with enthusiasm, achieving success and coming away from the experience feeling a sense of increased confidence. Perhaps struggling readers' lack of hatred towards poetry, as I have experienced it, is due the fact that the poems I typically select are short, or perhaps the students enjoy poetry because it reminds them of songs they like. Or maybe the students just like the fact that poetry can be interpreted in several different ways, and don't feel this is necessarily the case with prose, whether it be fiction or nonfiction. Whatever the reasons may be, reading and discussing poetry is a very effective instructional tool for students of all academic abilities and interest levels.

As mentioned above, in the Objectives section, students will complete a culminating research-based activity at the conclusion of this unit. This involves the students developing their own research questions and then using available resources to answer that question, before presenting their findings to the class. In my experience, once students come up with their own questions based on their interests, they become heavily invested in finding research materials that answer their question. Some students might need additional reinforcement on how to formulate a question, or they might need to be led towards resources or shown how to find reliable sources; I have included in this unit some helpful tips in both these areas.

Finally, I would like to add a brief note on the prevalence of technology in this unit. This unit was developed to be implemented at School of the Future, which is a technology-intensive 1:1 laptop school, meaning each student has his/her own laptop for use in and out of the classroom. Our PC's are Windows-based, making Microsoft Student a natural choice for reference materials. In our classrooms, we also use LCD projectors rather than writing extensively on the board. Additionally, Promethean boards enhance instruction, adding the capability of being able to use a stylus to navigate directly on the whiteboard, rather than having to control things from a computer. All that being said, technology assists our instruction at School of the Future, but it is not a necessary piece of good teaching. High-quality instruction and productive learning experiences can happen with or without the bells and whistles of technology.

Activities

Activity 1: Building Background (length: 1 class period)

Learning Objective

Students will develop awareness of Afghan culture by reading and discussing two informational articles: one from an online encyclopedia, and another from the *New York Times*.

Learning Plan

At the start of class, students will answer the following question: What do you already know about Afghanistan? They should take 2-3 minutes to write down their responses; if students state that they don't know anything, provide some helpful prompts, such as reminding them of 9/11 or the Taliban, and perhaps those hints will activate their prior knowledge.

After each student reflects independently, the teacher should ask for volunteers to state what they wrote. Depending on the amount of prior knowledge held by the students, it might be necessary to inform the class of some rudimentary concepts. Some things to mention are: Afghanistan's location, the existence of the Taliban as a repressive fundamentalist government, controversies about the current leadership, the fact that the United States military forces are heavily invested in their mission to bring stability to the region, the impoverished conditions of many of its citizens, internal civil conflicts between ethnic groups, rights of women, etc.

Next, students will read and discuss one or two texts. The first text, from the Microsoft Student Encyclopedia by Encarta, provides some basic facts and background information about Afghanistan. Navigating through the article using a laptop—as my students do here at School of the Future—it is possible to explore associated content beyond the article itself, such as maps and sidebar sections that delve into greater depth. The second text for examination and discussion is a recent article from the *New York Times*, entitled “Into Kandahar, Yesterday and Tomorrow,” written by journalist John F. Burns and published in May of 2010. The article compares the Kandahar of the 1980s with its present state, while giving historical context that goes back to the 18th century. This text provides a narrative of how the city, the people, and the nation have changed over time. The author is a veteran journalist who covered conditions in Kandahar in 1989, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To provide differentiated instruction—that is, classwork at a variety of ability levels in order to accommodate for the varying strengths of students in a given class—the teacher has some flexibility with this activity. Students who demonstrate stronger reading comprehension skills and can work at a fast pace would likely be able to successfully read and understand both articles within a single 45-to-60 class period. Teachers might assign only the encyclopedia article to those students who struggle and allow students to

demonstrate understanding by defining the key terms listed in Appendix B. Additionally, students who read at grade level and/or who have a good background understanding of Afghanistan's geography and culture might be best served by reading just the *New York Times* article, referencing the Microsoft Student Encyclopedia when they bump up against unfamiliar terms, concepts, or events.

During and after reading, students should be able to define some key terms and describe some key concepts that were covered in these two texts. Please see Appendix B for a list of terms that teachers may want to include on a worksheet or graphic organizer. I encourage teachers to edit this list to suit the needs of their students.

To provide enrichment for advanced students, the teacher might ask students to compare the two texts, one of which is a compendium of facts and the other of which is a personal reflection on the changes within a city over a span of time. This will raise the larger question of whether we learn best through facts or through descriptions of experiences.

Finally, as a formative assessment—to get a snapshot of what students have learned that day—students will complete an exit slip at the end of the class. An exit slip is basically the student's ticket out of the classroom, meant to take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete. Depending on the progress of the lesson, the materials covered, the prior knowledge of the students, etc, the teacher can craft a good exit slip question that will allow them to ascertain what the students learned that day. "What did you learn today?" is always a good standby.

Activity 2: *Afghan Star* (length: 1-3 class periods, depending on how much of the documentary is shown during class)

Learning Objective

Students will compare Afghan and American cultural values by viewing and discussing a documentary: the critically acclaimed, award-winning 2009 film *Afghan Star*. After building background knowledge by participating in a comparison of Afghan media to American media, they will view the film—either in whole or in part, depending on the needs of the class and time limitations—accessing their knowledge of American popular culture to facilitate comparisons. Following the documentary, they can participate in a series of discussion questions provided. They will finally demonstrate their understanding by reading and responding to a review of the film.

Learning Plan

To build continuity into the unit, the class will begin with a short review of the new information gained in Building Background (see Activity 1). In order to ensure students

can put this documentary in context, the teacher should be sure students understand the impact of religion on Afghan culture.

After this brief review, the teacher can introduce the documentary *Afghan Star* by activating the students' prior knowledge about *American Idol*. For those unfamiliar, *American Idol* is a reality television show centering around amateur singers. Each week they perform, and the audience votes on which contestant is the best. The contestant with the fewest votes, then, is eliminated. Typically, each "American Idol" then goes on to become a celebrity; however, eliminated contestants have also garnered fame.

After activating the students' prior knowledge of *American Idol*, the teacher should give the students some things to think about in order to frame the "reading" of *Afghan Star*. It is incredibly important at this juncture to present the history of Afghan media and television, because it is so vastly different from what we are familiar with here in the United States. While television was a staple in American households beginning in the mid-20th century, in Afghanistan television broadcasts did not arrive until 1978 (Clay 1). In 1996, when the Taliban took over the country they banned television, smashing televisions belonging to private citizens and decreeing that anyone found in possession of a television set would be punished (Clay 1). Television re-emerged in 2001 after the Taliban regime fell (Clay 1). Although there are a handful of television stations broadcasting in Afghanistan, it pales in comparison to the hundreds of channels most Americans have access to.

Students should also be made aware that, in addition, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not guaranteed rights in Afghanistan in the same way they are in America. After the fall of the Taliban, the newly ensconced government ratified the Media Law providing freedom of the press; however, the government reserves the right to curtail any speech they feel is against the interests of the nation or a possible threat to national security (Warasta 1). How, then, might the content portrayed in the media be affected by the government's insistence that Afghan journalists remain uncritical of the government and the nation?

Given this background information about the media, students should discuss their predictions about how an *American Idol*-style show could be similar or different when produced by, and presented for, an Afghan audience on Afghan television. They could share these insights with each other, or write them independently. Either way, the background information and their thoughts will provide important contextualized learning for getting the most out of viewing the documentary.

During viewing of the documentary, students can think about the differences they notice between the Afghan show and its American counterpart, including perhaps a discussion on why the show isn't called *Afghan Idol* but, rather, *Afghan Star*. Sometimes students have a hard time focusing during instructional or informational videos and need

a task to do during viewing to keep them focused and track their learning. In order to accomplish that task, they can take bullet-point or outline notes or fill out a compare/contrast graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram or a T-Chart.

To assess learning, students will engage with journalistic reviews of the film. A compendium of reviews from reputable newspapers, blogs, and other sources can be found online at <http://www.afghanstardocumentary.com/press.html>. If this list is insufficient or becomes unavailable, a Google search will likely turn up several reviews. Students should choose one review, or the teacher can provide guided differentiation by assigning reviews to students based on their reading level. Given their specific article, the students should read the review carefully and then thoughtfully before responding to the questions found in the worksheet in Appendix C as they collect and write their responses to the reviews.

Activity 3: Poetry in Perspective (1-2 class periods)

Learning Objective

Students will be able to understand, analyze, and compare Afghan poetry and poetry written by American military personnel serving in Afghanistan. They will describe literary devices in the poems (such as figurative language, imagery, rhyme, etc) and evaluate the effectiveness of those devices. They will write a poem from a perspective of their choice, in order to demonstrate understanding of point of view and the prevalent issues surrounding the conflict in Afghanistan.

Learning Plan

To begin class, distribute a handout of a poem “Like a Desert Flower” by contemporary Afghan poet Parween Faiz Zadah Malaal and present biographical information as necessary (see appendix D). In this poem, the female poet Malaal creates several similes to describe the speaker’s thirst for peace in Afghanistan. These similes allow readers to get a sense of everyday life and common cultural beliefs in Afghanistan. As students read this short poem, the teacher can ask them to make connections between what they already know about Afghanistan with what is presented in the poem. Based on an effective reading of the poem, students will state that they notice a yearning for peace, the presence of women, and the realities of rural desert life.

After a brief post-reading discussion to ensure students understand the poem, the students should make some educated guesses, or predictions, about themes they might expect to find in Afghan poetry or poetry written by Americans about Afghanistan. Students will probably state that they expect to notice a great deal of violence, death, fear, oppression, pride for one’s homeland, and religious faith as strong themes. From American poems about Afghanistan, students will likely predict to encounter violence,

loss, and anger. It is likely, too, that students will have personal connections to Afghanistan, as they may have friends or relatives serving there; these students often question why their loved ones are being asked to travel halfway around the world to fight and perhaps die, for purposes that seem so removed from the day-to-day life of the American teenager. These predictions will provide a springboard for reading and discussing two additional poems: “The Bloody Epitaph” by Afghan poet Partaw Naderi and “A Taste of Afghanistan” by an American soldier who has served in Afghanistan, Rob Densmore.

To facilitate understanding and discussion of “The Bloody Epitaph” and “A Taste of Afghanistan,” group work is most conducive. The teacher should assign the students to mixed-ability groups of 3-4 students per group and distribute the poems. They can be found online via the sources listed in the annotated bibliography. Briefly present biographical information about the poets. The students should tackle the poems one by one, with a brief interlude for whole-class discussion. Upon noticing that “The Bloody Epitaph” was written in 1989, students might wonder whether it is still relevant: assure them that they will be able to answer this question after reading the poem written by an American soldier.

First, students should analyze and discuss “The Bloody Epitaph.” In their groups, students should begin their group activity by reading the poem aloud to each other. After reading, students should be able to describe what is happening in the poem by analyzing the symbol of the palm tree; perhaps they will notice similarities to “Like a Desert Flower.” They should be able to identify the poet’s use of personification, as a literary terms review. Finally, they should be able to state the themes they notice in the poem and whether their understanding of the poem coincides with the themes they predicted they might find in Afghan poetry. During this group activity, it’s helpful for the teacher to circulate around the classroom, from group to group, to answer any questions that might arise in terms of comprehension, vocabulary, historical connections, etc.

After the first poem has been discussed in the groups, the whole class should regroup for a few minutes, so that a member of each group can share their group’s insights with the entire class. This provides the teacher with another opportunity to assess understanding, and it also allows students to develop their speaking skills, which builds overall confidence. The teacher should then direct the groups’ attention to “A Taste of Afghanistan” by introducing it as a poem written by a former US Navy soldier, who has since returned to Afghanistan as a journalist and has conducted mental health research there; this poem was published online in 2009.

As with the Naderi poem, students should begin by reading “A Taste of Afghanistan” aloud. It is lengthy, so students could take turns reading stanzas if they prefer. It is most productive to discuss this poem as a comparison of point of view, in contrast with the poems written by Afghan poets. As students evaluate the poem, they should be thinking

about how Densmore sees Afghanistan as an outsider and how he feels about the country, its people, and his role there. The poet uses figurative language effectively to render a striking depiction of the country and the conflict; of all the examples I looked through in my research, this was the most evocative and intriguing. It is my hope that students find it moving and captivating, as well as instructive.

To show understanding of the American poem, the class should regroup once again and representatives from each group should be able to summarize their group's discussion, stating the most striking difference they noticed between the American poet's depiction of Afghanistan and an Afghan poet's depiction of their own country. In this comparison, they should feel free to draw from the Naderi poem as well as the Malaal poem.

As a performance of understanding of the various perspectives on the conflict in Afghanistan, the final step in this activity is to have the students compose a poem from a given perspective of their choice. They can choose to write as an Afghan citizen or as an American, and their poem should mirror the model in tone and theme. Poems can be any length, but I have found that 15-20 lines is an appropriate length in terms of showing the writer's ability to sustain thought and perspective. Depending on their prior knowledge of poetry, the teacher can decide whether to require the students to include examples of certain types of figurative language.

There are several options for teachers at this juncture, in terms of making the activity more comprehensive and intensive. The teacher can simply provide class time for students to compose their poems and leave it at that. To make the activity instructive in the writing process, the teacher can expand this activity to include a poetry workshop, where students pair up and critique each other's work. To continue to build formal presentation skills, the teacher can also ask that students read their poems aloud to the class.

Activity 4: Effects of The "Forever" War

Learning Objective

Students will describe the long-term effects of war on the conscience and development of a culture through reading a nonfiction account of Afghanistan under the Taliban, written by an American journalist. They will be able to

Learning Plan

This activity begins with a question: How do outsiders view Afghanistan? To respond to the question, students can draw from any number of resources, as at this point in the unit they have a great deal of background knowledge. They can consider their background

reading from the New York Times, their viewing of Afghan Star, and the poem “A Taste of Afghanistan.” This question does not have one easy answer, so teachers should consider all responses as valid if they can be backed up by solid reason or legitimate examples from texts.

After a brief discussion of the above question, students should read and discuss excerpts from Dexter Filkins’ book *The Forever War*. The first section of the book concerns the author’s experiences as a journalist working in Kabul in 1998; Chapter 1, “Only This,” contains a series of vignettes that depict life in Afghanistan under the Taliban, including a variety of perspectives. The stories Filkins tells in this chapter are gripping and unforgettable, and his writing style is engaging and accessible, making this an excellent choice reading and discussion.

The textual organization of this chapter lends itself to a differentiated group activity. Each group will be assigned a different section of the text, along with a focusing question that the students will explore during and after reading. Each group should also be directed to evaluate how the text reflects the themes we have been discussing thus far about the conflict in Afghanistan. As the groups read and discuss, the teacher will circulate between groups, keeping the students on task, answering questions if necessary, and facilitating discussion as needed. Please see Appendix E for a breakdown of how to divide the chapter, along with a list of focus questions for each section.

After the groups have read and thoroughly discussed their section, a representative from each group should report back to the entire class. Within the time frame of about 3-5 minutes, the student should provide the rest of the class with a short summary of their selection and explain how their text connects to what they already know about Afghanistan.

As extra reinforcement or to delve deeper into this exciting text, there are several options. The teacher can ask students to read the remainder of the chapter, and perhaps write a paragraph or two in response. The writing assignment can be a general reflection, or perhaps something more specific; should the teacher take this route, they can use the guiding questions in Appendix E as a starting point for coming up with an appropriate reflection prompt.

Activity 5: Connections to *Kite Runner* (2 class periods)

Learning Objective

This lesson is meant to tie in the novel *Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, with concepts and themes covered in the unit thus far. The goal of this activity is to have students evaluate the impact of various historical events on the characters in the novel by working through various stations around the classroom; more is explained in detail below.

Students are expected to have read the entire novel before completing this activity, as it refers to plot events that happen at the end of the book.

Background for Activity

The activity begins with a brief review of the plot of *Kite Runner*. The teacher should be sure to discuss the major characters, the initial conflict that causes Amir and Hassan's friendship to fracture, Amir's immigration to America, and his return to Pakistan and Afghanistan years later. The class should also review Amir's mission to rescue Sohrab, the complications surrounding Sohrab's situation, the final conflict with Assef, and the bittersweet ending to the novel.

During this activity, students will move around the room to various stations. These stations should be spread evenly throughout the classroom, leaving plenty of room for students to circulate as they will be changing locations every few minutes. The instructions for each station can be hung on the walls, using chart paper if available (in which case students will remain on their feet) or taped to a desk (the desks should be arranged into tables or groups of 4 so that students will be able to face each other as they work together).

The teacher will act as a facilitator for a variety of activities placed around the classroom; he/she will keep track of time, make sure each group completes all four activities over the two-day period, ensure students are on task, and direct students to switch when time is up. Because the activities are both intensive and involved, the students will only move through two stations each day; there are four stations, allowing for two days of class time. Approximately 15-20 minutes should be allotted each activity. On the second day of the activity, students will complete a brief concluding task after all have moved through each station.

Station 1: Friendship

At station 1, students will evaluate the friendship between Hassan and Amir in terms of how their differing social classes, and Amir's character flaws, impact the turn their friendship takes. Instead of completing a writing prompt or answering a series of questions, students will instead collaborate on a comic strip which will illustrate graphical representations of significant moments in the progression of their friendship. For this activity, the teacher should instruct the students to think about the four to six most significant moments in the book relating to the friendship between these two characters. Each moment should then be depicted graphically on one square of the comic strip.

Content, comprehension, and identification of important events are the most important aspects of this activity. The comic strips do not need to be very artistic—stick figures are

perfectly acceptable as long as it is clear who is who. Rather than focus on whether the comic strip is a masterpiece of visual art, students should be instructed to accurately and sensitively depict the events in the story. They might use word balloons or bits of narrative to bring their comic strip to life.

Station 2: Human Rights

At this station, students will examine the events in *Kite Runner* from a human rights perspective. They will first make a list of basic human rights and then put various groups or characters on trial for their crimes. They will, finally, determine whether the perpetrators of the crimes are guilty or not.

First, students should answer the following question: what are five basic rights that all people should have, no matter what? They will likely come up with responses relating to freedom of religion, the right to be safe, the right to be free from hunger, the right to make basic choices about one's life, and so forth. They should list these rights on a piece of paper.

Next, the group should examine each of these rights and consider whether any characters or groups in the book violated these rights. For example, the group may have listed "the right to be free from hunger" as a basic human right. They could use Zaman, the owner of the orphanage—and the children he has taken in—an example of a victim of this crime. They are starving, having not being provided with food or money by the Taliban. Naturally, they would "charge" the Taliban with the crime of violating this human right.

For each of the rights the students have defined as basic human rights, they should be able to come up with at least one example of a point in the novel where the right was violated. They should be able to identify the responsible party, and in most cases, the Taliban will be responsible. However, in other circumstances, characters are both perpetrators and victims of crimes: take Zaman, for example, who is starved by the Taliban but also violates his orphans' right to safety by periodically selling them to the Taliban.

At this point, students should be able to produce their list of rights as well as 1-2 examples of a point in that book when that right was violated; for each example they should state the perpetrator of each violation as well. Finally, they should discuss whether the perpetrators of the crime are considered "guilty" or "not guilty." A "not guilty" verdict would mean that there was something that compelled the person to commit their crime: to return to Zaman yet again, he violated his orphans' right to safety occasionally so that he could get money for food.

I recommend that the teacher create a graphic organizer for students to complete at this station. It would contain five sections—one for each basic human right listed by the students—with space beneath to write about the victims, perpetrators, and other details about the event in question.

Station 3: Insiders and Outsiders

Much of the action in *Kite Runner* seems to be centered on conflict between outsiders and insiders, or dominant and subordinate groups. Because this same concept is so strong throughout the novel and reflects the cultural currents present in Afghanistan today, it is an important discussion to have at this juncture. During the course of this activity, students will discuss who has power and who doesn't in *Kite Runner* (as a valid representation of the reality of Afghanistan) and how that compares to circumstances in their day-to-day lives.

First, students should describe who is in power in the book at various junctures. The teacher can come up with a list of plot points that are particularly illustrative of the power dynamics within the novel. Alternatively, the students can come up with these examples independently with only minimal prompting, if they are able. In this discussion they should consider group dynamics as well as individual characters that either have or lack power.

To connect the text to their daily lives, each student should work independently to reflect on experiences they have had which might hold resonance to power dynamics. Each student should write two paragraphs relating to their own experiences. The first paragraph should tell about a time when they had power over someone or felt part of a group that had power over others. How did that feel? What did they learn about themselves as a result of having power? The second paragraph will take the opposite tone: students will write about experiences they had where they lacked power, or belonged to an oppressed group. What did that feel like? What did they learn? Each paragraph should be 5-7 sentences long, and students should share their paragraphs afterwards if they wish.

Station 4: Ambiguous Endings

As readers know, *Kite Runner* has a very ambiguous and thought-provoking ending that lends itself to much speculation. Sohrab, Hassan's son, attempts suicide as a reaction to a broken promise from Amir. Their relationship is healed a bit when Amir and Sohrab fly kites together, and Amir acts as the kite runner for the little boy. We know that Amir has a very complicated relationship with Hassan, his secret half-brother and Sohrab's father. This relationship is complicated because of ethnicity, social class, and the fact that the truth was hidden from Amir for most of his life, while Hassan never knew that Baba was

his father. During this activity, students will contemplate what Amir should tell Sohrab in the future, when Sohrab gets older and starts asking questions.

Students, working in their groups, should imagine the moment beyond the ending, perhaps years down the road, where Sohrab asks Amir about his biological parents and about why he is with Amir. What will Amir tell Sohrab, and what will he choose to leave out, if anything? The students will then collaboratively craft a letter that Amir will write to Sohrab answering (or not answering) these questions. The letter will be from Amir's point of view and should be 2-3 paragraphs in length.

Conclusion

To bring closure to this two-day-long activity, students will complete a gallery walk so that students can see what work other groups have accomplished. The teacher can spread the comic strips, graphic organizers, paragraphs, and letters on desks in the classroom (or tape them to the wall) and have students walk around the room viewing the items. Hopefully, each group will have a unique interpretation of each task, and viewing several examples of work will enable students to gain further insight regarding the perspectives explored in this set of activities.

Annotated Bibliography and Resources

Afghan Star. Dir. Havana Marking. HBO Films, 2009. DVD.

This film can be shown in full or in part during the activities that compare Afghan and American culture. It is a documentary about Afghanistan's version of the popular American television show *American Idol* and the reaction it got from the population of Afghanistan.

Burns, John F. "Into Kandahar, Yesterday and Tomorrow." *The New York Times*. 21 May 2010. Web. 22 May 2010.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/weekinreview/23burns.html?scp=7&sq=kandahar&st=cse>>.

This article provides the basis for discussion in Activity 1. As noted above, it can be used as an enrichment activity or as the main text covered in the lesson, depending on time constraints and the abilities of students.

Clay, Warren. "Afghanistan Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers - Newspaper, Television, News, Circulation, Stations, Papers, Number, Print, Freedom, Mass Media, Broadcasting." *Press Reference*. Web. 13 May 2010.

<<http://www.pressreference.com/A-Be/Afghanistan.html>>.

This article provides some important facts on the history of the media in Afghanistan, especially the Taliban's role on restricting media during the period of 1996-2001. This information was used in the creation of Activity 2.

Densmore, Rob. "A Taste of Afghanistan." "Poems by Soldiers and Other Members of the Armed Services." *The War Poetry Website - The First World War and Contemporary War Poetry*. Ed. David Roberts. 2009. Web. 12 June 2010.
<[http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Afghanistan War Poetry.html#A taste of Afghanistan](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Afghanistan%20War%20Poetry.html#A%20taste%20of%20Afghanistan)>.

Here is the online source for the poem by Rob Densmore, used in Activity 4, called "A Taste of Afghanistan." This web resource also contains several other poems—of varying literary merit—written by soldiers serving in conflicts all over the globe. Most of the soldiers are either American or British.

Filkins, Dexter. *The Forever War*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

Filkins is a journalist covering various conflicts in the Middle East. Chapter 1 in particular provides some very helpful insight on the effects of the Taliban and its impact on the mindset of Afghan culture. It will be used as the source material for Activity 4 of this unit.

Hosseini, Khaled. *Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead, 2003.

Kite Runner is one of the most important and widely-read novels about Afghanistan and spent several weeks on the *New York Times*' best-seller list. Activity 5 of this unit utilizes this text as a source for discussion, comparison, and reflection.

Naderi, Partaw. "The Bloody Epitaph by Partaw Naderi - Poems." *Poetry Translation Centre*. Trans. Sarah Maguire. Web. 12 June 2010.
<http://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/172/The_Bloody_Epitaph>.

This is the online source for Partaw Naderi's poem "The Bloody Epitaph," translated by Sarah Maguire. On this website, you can also find some additional poems in translation, plus some biographical information about the poet.

"Press Cuttings for Afghan Star - The Documentary." *Afghan Star - The Documentary*. Web. 02 June 2010. <<http://www.afghanstardocumentary.com/press.html>>.

After viewing *Afghan Star* and completing the discussion questions listed in Appendix C, students will evaluate reviews of the documentary. They can either use a search engine to locate online reviews, or they can use this site, which provides a collection of reviews from a variety of widely-read and reputable newspapers and magazines.

Wagner, Erica, ed. "The Real War Poets: Contemporary War Poems from the Front Line" *Times Online*. Web. 26 May 2010.
<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/poetry/article6758776.ece>.

This is the online source for “Like a Desert Flower” by contemporary Afghan poet Parween Faiz Zadah Malaal; biographical information about the poet can also be found here. The introductory material contains some helpful background for teaching war poetry, and the article contains a collection of poems, selected by the *Times of London*, that represent the best of contemporary war poetry from around the globe.

Warasta, Waleed. "Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan: Restrictive Laws, Self-censorship Keep Criticism to a Minimum | The Dominion." *The Dominion*. Web. 02 June 2010. <<http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/1634>>.

This article provides facts on censorship in Afghanistan’s media. It contains important background information that can be used throughout the unit, however, it can be most helpful for preparing to teach the *Afghan Star* activity.

Appendix A: Standards

The following Pennsylvania State Standards for English (Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking) will be covered over the course of this unit.

1.1.11.B: Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes.

1.1.11.G: Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of fiction and nonfiction.

1.2.11.B: Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced (e.g. video clips).

1.3.11.A: Read and understand works of literature.

1.3.11.F: Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction.

1.4.11.B: Write complex informational pieces.

1.5.11.G: Present and/or defend written work for publication.

1.6.11.D: Contribute to discussions.

1.7.11.B: Analyze when differences in language are a source of negative or positive stereotypes among groups.

1.8.11.C: Organize, summarize, and present the main ideas from research.

Appendix B: List of Key Terms for Activity 1

(Please adjust this list to suit the needs of students, adding or deleting items as necessary.)

Groups of People:

Pashtuns

Tajiks

Uzbeks

Hazaras

Taliban

Sunni Muslims

Shi'a Muslims

Important Places:

Kandahar

Kabul

Soviet Union

Concepts:

Islam

Daily life in Afghanistan

Nomadic life (before 1979)

Women's rights

Typical Afgahn

Village structure

Education system

Appendix C: *Afghan Star* Discussion Questions

The following questions can be used as writing prompts or for class/small group discussion.

1. How is *Afghan Star* similar to, and different from, *American Idol*?
2. How does the strict Islamic culture of Afghanistan make it difficult for women to participate in the contest?
3. The documentary footage shows a great deal of what Afghanistan looks like, and it also gives us an idea of what daily life in Afghanistan is like. What was most interesting to you about this aspect of the documentary?
4. Setara, one of the contestants, is punished for dancing and showing her hair as she performs in the semi-finals. In fact, she received death threats and lost her apartment. Do you agree with her defiance of Afghan cultural norms? What do you think she hoped to accomplish? Was she successful? Why or why not?
5. What do you notice about the fans' involvement in the show? How does it compare with *American Idol* viewers?
6. The three finalists come from different ethnic groups: Pashtun, Hazara, and Tajik. Do you think this shows tolerance between ethnic groups? Do you think that people voted for contestants based on their ethnicity?
7. How would your life be different if you lived in Afghanistan?

Appendix D: Breakdown and Guiding Questions for Excerpt from *The Forever War*

Segment 1: Page 13 (beginning of chapter) to section break on page 21 (ends with the line, “‘We walked across deserts and mountains,’ he said.”)

Guiding Question 1: Filkins writes in this chapter about the victims of the Taliban: not just those who have been executed, but orphans and widows. What stories does he tell about the experiences of ordinary people?

Segment 2: After section break on page 21 to section break on page 29 (ends with the line, “‘I don’t know what we have done to earn the enmity of so many countries.’”)

Guiding Question 2: Describe the changes that have swept through Afghanistan from the 1960s to the 1990s. How does Filkins use the InterContinental Hotel as a metaphor for the country itself?

Segment 3: After section break on page 29 to end of chapter.

Guiding Question 3: In this segment of the chapter, Filkins describes meeting with Taliban officials. How does he characterize them?