

Globalizing the Curriculum for K–12

by NATALIE ARSENAULT



“WE WOULD LIKE TO introduce Hemispheres, the international area studies outreach consortium at the University of Texas at Austin. Our mission is to help educators incorporate world studies content into their classrooms and existing curricula.” In summer 2003, we sent out this introduction and our first calendar—with images from Latin America;

the Middle East; Russia, East Europe, and Eurasia; and South Asia—to social studies curriculum coordinators throughout the state of Texas. Hemispheres was ready to go statewide, and this was our first step in that direction.

Hemispheres began in 1995 as an informal consortium of the four National Resource Centers (NRCs) at UT, with a two-day “how to use the Internet” workshop for teachers. In 1998, Hemispheres started to offer week-long, on-campus workshops on thematic world studies topics and to provide content, rather than skills training, for educators. When I arrived at LLILAS in 2001, Hemispheres activities included the annual summer institute and a newsletter for teachers. However, we had the resources to build a more engaging and proactive program of activities. I believed that Hemispheres needed to take an active role in creating materials and providing training to a wide array and great number of educators. Christopher Rose, the Assistant Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the most senior member of

Hemispheres, recalls, “When I started, the group seemed satisfied with the work we were already doing and, because of individual interests, didn’t want to expand our joint work. But then Natalie came on and said ‘we should be doing more’ and it clicked. I thought to myself, ‘Yes. Finally.’ We took off from there.”

We began with a calendar: sixteen culturally significant photographs, taken by our graduate students and faculty, accompanied by captions that could serve as a stimulus for discussion of our four world regions. The calendar was designed to promote our services, in the hopes of working more closely with classroom teachers. It worked. In January 2004, Arlington Independent School District, in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, asked us to present to their social studies teachers at a district-wide training program. We were thrilled but, unsure of what to present, we asked for a list of standards-related topics with which their teachers were struggling. We then discussed their suggested topics in terms of which ones had been mentioned by other teachers, what kinds of university resources we could access to address them, and how to format the materials for teachers. Based on our experience with our summer teachers’ institutes, we knew that supplemental materials were in high demand by educators frustrated with minimal textbook coverage of important state-mandated standards.

Arlington may have expected a simple presentation, but we delivered a complete, ready-to-use curriculum unit with both middle and high school activities: “Understanding Migration: Curriculum Resources for the Classroom.” The unit, written by outreach staff in each of the four NRCs, includes a historical and theoretical overview about human migration through history and regional case studies that allow students to examine topics such as the deteriorating quality of life in lower-class urban areas in Brazil, the partition of India, the debate

over the Palestinian right of return, and the repatriation of ethnic Russians from the Newly Independent States.

The curriculum unit was an instant success, and the Arlington teachers appreciated our presentation style, which focused on content rather than pedagogy. One teacher commented on the evaluation, “I appreciated the way this particular workshop was presented. I felt that I was back in a college classroom setting. . . .” This remains our highest compliment, and one that we receive regularly: our training sessions bring educators back to their college days and offer them a peek into current research and thinking about world studies.

“Understanding Migration” has now been presented 22 times, to 650 educators, at school districts, regional education service centers, and state and national conferences. If a mere 10 percent of those teachers use the unit at least once, approximately 7,800 students will have used our materials to study migration. In addition to our training sessions, “Understanding Migration” is available on the Hemispheres Web site, and has received national attention through its inclusion on Outreach World, a national online clearinghouse of resources for teaching international studies. Since its debut on Outreach World, it has been a top download.

Based on the success of “Understanding Migration,” Hemispheres continues to create curriculum units written with an eye to state and national teaching standards, and in response to needs identified at various educator events. The success of the units is due, in large part, to input from the teachers with whom we work: we listen to their needs and try to address the gaps in their knowledge and in their textbooks. To date, we have written three more units:

“People and Place: Human-Environmental Interactions,” with fourteen case studies that address global issues, such as water management and pollution, and region-specific phenomena, such as the challenges of living in the coldest part of Siberia and conservation in a highly biodiverse Ecuador.

“Africa Enslaved: Comparative Slave Systems outside the United States,” which uses primary source documents to compare and contrast historical slave systems in Brazil, Ottoman Egypt, Haiti, and the Swahili Emirates of East Africa.

“Explorers, Traders, and Immigrants:

Tracking the Social and Cultural Impact of the Global Commodity Trade,” which examines eight global commodities—including chocolate, rice, and indigo, among others—from their points of origin through the social, cultural, political, and economic changes they wrought along their journeys.

Along with our supply of Hemispheres-created curriculum, our educator training program has expanded significantly and now includes 8–10 professional development sessions, plus conference presentations, each year. Most sessions, which last a full day, include a combination of content presentations (e.g., Contemporary Brazil, Geography of the Middle East) and activities from our curriculum units. Attendance numbers at Hemispheres professional development presentations have been increasing steadily, especially in locations where we have presented previously. Thus far, we have presented to more than 1,750 educators.

Today, Hemispheres continues its active program of curriculum development and related professional development workshops throughout Texas. The off-campus workshops reach teachers who do not have the opportunity to attend campus-based events and, because of grant support, the workshops are free, enabling low-income school districts to host Hemispheres. Although we are far from covering all of Texas, we have traveled from Brownsville to El Paso, Houston to Lubbock, and to cities large and small in between. We believe that this pairing of curriculum and training is one of the best ways to fulfill our outreach mission. Feedback from our districts—including our first host, Arlington Independent School District, which brings us back regularly—indicates that we are filling an important need in world studies. After a recent presentation, Kathy Riggle, a Social Studies Instructional Specialist, wrote, “I wanted to let you know how much we appreciate you coming to Arlington again to share your wealth of information and insight . . . I had a teacher, who attended your [last] session, who wants us to have you back every month!” As long as educators respond this way, Hemispheres will continue to trek across Texas—and, we hope, other states—to deliver solid world studies content to those who need it.

Natalie Arsenault is LLILAS Outreach Director. ☀

PETROBRAS AND UT AUSTIN RENEW PARTNERSHIP

Culminating efforts to reinvigorate the University of Texas at Austin’s relationship with Petrobras, the national oil company of Brazil, in February 2007 the university signed a multi-year agreement with the company to educate geoscientists and work on collaborative projects. The agreement provides up to \$7.5 million in research, education, and training over the next five years. A major portion focuses on large research projects that provide hands-on training with real-world data for Petrobras engineers and geologists working with the Bureau of Economic Geology. The work began with projects to study the carbonate reservoirs of Brazil.

The agreement includes hosting some of the brightest Petrobras scientists at the Jackson School of Geosciences while they pursue master’s and doctoral degrees in geology, geophysics, and the Jackson School’s graduate program in Energy & Earth Resources (EER). The EER curriculum offers a model for training across disciplines. By May 2008, more than 100 Petrobras managers had been to Austin working with faculty from EER and the McCombs School of Business, completing short courses that integrated business, regulatory, environmental, geoscience, and engineering practices.

Sylvia Couto Anjos, a petroleum systems manager for Petrobras who helped negotiate the deal, called it a reinvigoration of Petrobras’s long-term relationship with UT Austin. The once-strong ties had lapsed during the 1980s and 1990s, “but now it’s a new generation, new people,” said Couto. “We expect great results.”