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Voices from the Field:
Building Prior Knowledge and Exploding Stereotypes:
A Persepolis WebQuest

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Introduction

The first time I introduced students to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), I was using it as a main text in my teaching of literature methods course for future English teachers. The graphic memoir is the story of a young Iranian girl during the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and I had chosen it for the course because of its familiar young adult themes: coming of age, struggling with society's values, rebellion, and negotiating thresholds. I also wanted to expose these future teachers to an emerging, popular form of media, graphic literature, which most of the class saw as an inferior form of literature. It took a semester of these pre-service teachers working with the memoir to fully appreciate the potential this graphic memoir holds for engaging students in meaningful discussions about literature and life, not only on the traditional coming of age theme, but also on the ways it compels students to confront their relative ignorance about Iranian history and culture. My classroom had been a place where we wrestled with the place of graphic literature in English Language Arts curricula and with our ideas about how best to incorporate the form into the secondary classrooms in which they would soon be teaching. The use of *Persepolis* in this course made it clear to me that media literacy education should be an integral part of any teacher education program.

When the pre-service students in the course and I discussed the strategies that teachers would need to use in order to help their students get the most out of *Persepolis*, we all agreed that students would need to focus on the historic and sociopolitical aspects of the memoir, and we agreed that students would need background information on Iran at the time of the Islamic Revolution, the time period that Marjane, the memoir-

ist, experiences in the memoir. The novice teachers felt that their own ignorance of Iran's culture and history had hindered their full appreciation of Marjane's story. Because most of these novices were Millennials (the generation born in or after 1982), most likely they had never known Iran as anything other than part of the "axis of evil" or a perceived enemy of the United States. While I remember nightly news reports of the Shah of Iran's exile and the Iranian hostage crisis (and the subsequent birth of *Nightline*), the students in my methods courses had no personal memory of Iran during that time.

Indeed, the majority of students in schools today may have never studied the country and its culture in depth beyond knowing its main exports, capital, rivers, and religious leaders. Their world history class may have informed them that Iran was part of the vast Persian empire, but their feelings about that fact may have been tainted by the popular movie *300* (an adaptation of a graphic novel of the same name), in which Persians are portrayed as demonic and barbarous villains. For most students in the U.S. today, the country of Iran has always held negative connotations connected with "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism," as Satrapi (2003) points out in her introduction to the memoir. The reasons for those feelings, however, are probably based only on Iran's portrayal in popular media since the country is largely ignored in most school curricula. It is easy, then, for these students to form erroneous stereotypes about the country and its people because they have unfortunately missed out on learning about Iran's extensive history, rich culture, and diverse society, all important elements in fully appreciating *Persepolis*.

Research by Judith Langer (1995) and our own experiences in the classroom tell us that the more readers know about a work prior to reading, the more they

understand. Because I wanted to help future readers of *Persepolis* develop a more thorough understanding of Iran and confront their stereotypes about the country *before* they read the memoir, and because I wanted to demonstrate the usefulness of technology in literacy education for another methods class, Literacy and Technology, I designed a webquest for students to explore Iran's history, culture, and society before and after the Islamic revolution. Through this webquest, learners have the opportunity to explore "representations, misrepresentations, and lack of representation of" Iran and to think critically about their current perceptions of Iran based on media representation (NAMLE 2007). Marla Harris (2007) suggests having students complete a webquest as an introduction to the Iranian culture and history behind the story. An online version of the webquest can be found at http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1063.

A webquest is "an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web" (Dodge 2007) and is becoming increasingly popular with the future English Language Arts teachers I work with. Because of the potential for less media-savvy students to get lost in the abundance of information on the internet, webquests are "teacher-directed. In essence, the teacher decides on a *path* through the Internet" (Firek 2003, 72). The teacher pre-screens the websites he or she wants the students to visit and verifies the specific information the students will glean from the site, thus helping students spend their time on *creating* a final project (in the case of the *Persepolis* webquest, a multimedia presentation, which relates to the media production aspect of media literacy education) with the information instead of spending valuable time *searching* for it. In addition, the *Persepolis* webquest allows students to apply traditional literacies of reading, writing, and research with multimodal and multicultural literacies, thus expanding learners' concept of literacy to include all forms of media (NAMLE 2007).

Webquests have benefits as well as drawbacks in media literacy education. They are appropriate for students who have not had a chance to practice active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages they receive and create, a Media Literacy Education Core Principal (NAMLE 2007). For students who have not yet learned to discern between credible and unreliable sites or for times when the instructor wants class time to be more focused than other internet searches might allow, a webquest works well. Misused, however, webquests limit students' own open-ended critical inquiry process-

es and reify a teacher-centered approach to education. Students are limited to websites the teacher has pre-selected and to finding information the teacher wants presented. While there is still room for learners to think critically about what information they want to include in their presentations as well as their media production, there is less opportunity to practice open inquiry during the research phase of a webquest. Of course, the teacher must factor in time and schedule constraints when deciding whether or not to use a webquest. If teachers are comfortable with their students' media literacy skills already and are under time pressure, then opting for a webquest or adapting the webquest to allow for students' open searches for information may be appropriate.

By confronting stereotypes and possible preconceived notions with reliable, relevant, focused information, students gain a new appreciation of the events that Marjane, the memoirist in *Persepolis*, experiences as she comes of age during the Islamic revolution. The exploration of Iran and its culture helps students critically examine their own attitudes about the country. In this way, they question their own preconceptions about Iran, based on limited curricula and the media's portrayal of the country (Satrapi 2003; Harris 2007). Working within a group during the webquest to discuss and analyze media messages they want to share, students are able to discuss their findings with others, understand and appreciate multiple viewpoints and perspectives (NAMLE 2007), and ultimately negotiate "hybrid forms of understanding" of and appreciation for Iran and its people (Carter 2008). In other words, the webquest is gateway into an educational space where multiple personal and social points of view can be considered in the pursuit of knowledge.

The Persepolis WebQuest

Persepolis WebQuest Goals

In the introduction to *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi writes that "an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists" (2003), implying that one of the reasons she wrote the memoir was to dispel the stereotypes that many people hold about Iran. This is the overriding goal of the *Persepolis* webquest, to explode myths about Iran and its people and more generally to help students think critically about the mediated information they receive about the global community. Because of Iran's negative portrayal in popular media and the lack of study of Iran in schools, the country has become perceived by many students as a nation of like-minded people, founded solely on a single, uni-

fied, religious ideology. Benedict Anderson calls this homogenized perception of cultures "imagined communities" (1984, 15), and though he uses the term to refer to the way people see their own communities, as limited, sovereign, and fraternal, I argue that students who see their *own* communities that way will most likely see *other* communities that way as well. Millennial students coming from privileged positions (as many U.S. students do) are perhaps at the greatest risk of making generalizations about other cultures because they have been afforded the luxuries associated with the U.S.'s dominance as a world power throughout their lifetimes.

Our students, then, may very well conceive of Iran as a nation of homogeneous people with similar ideas and values instead of a nation comprised of diverse peoples with a range of classes, ethnicities, and social values. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi presents Iran to the readers as a complex society with many Western influences. For example, in the memoir Marjane listens to Kim Wilde, wears blue jeans and Nikes, and has an Iron Maiden poster, all references to U.S. pop culture. Marjane and her liberal parents (who attend anti-government rallies, for instance) are contrasted with others in the culture who criticize them for being too Western. This webquest attempts to explore some of Iran's cultural complexities introduced in the book and prepares students to understand the cultural changes that Marjane experiences while at the same time creating an environment in which students grapple with their own perceptions of Iranian culture.

Meeting Standards and Guidelines

Because webquests compel students to integrate multiple modes of communication and expression through their research and presentations, this assignment also addresses NCTE's guidelines on multimodal literacies (2005), which advocate integrating different modes of expression in student work into the overall literacy goals of the curriculum. Today's students are sophisticated communicators, adeptly navigating different discourse communities and practicing multimodal literacies "naturally and spontaneously" (NCTE 2005). Classroom teachers who welcome different media experiences can capitalize on students' natural skills by creating opportunities for them to use their skills in authentic classroom assignments such as webquests. Teamwork, a component of the *Persepolis* webquest, is also an inherent part of multimodal projects because of their complexity and because of the different skill level each individual contributes to the

project. Students must rely on each other to contribute to the overall effectiveness of the project, and through group discussion and analysis of media messages learners practice understanding and appreciating different perspectives and points of view (NAMLE 2007).

The other webquest goals correspond with those in a regular English Language Arts classroom. I have used the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (1996) goals as my standards, and the following goals are specifically targeted in this webquest project:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Tasks, Objectives, and Processes

In addition to the goals, students have three task objectives, which are assessed during the final presentation:

- Students will research information about Iran during the Islamic revolution.
- Students will design a multimedia presentation.
- Students will present their findings to the rest of the class.

This project requires some class time as well as homework, but the schedule should be flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students and their capabilities in research and computer work.

Firek states that an introduction to a webquest “hooks the learner by establishing the situation, offering background information, and posing a question or presenting a problem” (2003, 75). Some webquest introductions set up imaginary scenarios: Students imagine that they travel through time or that they are journalists on a particular assignment (check out the webquest at <http://questgarden.com/46/94/4/070221061202/> by Jordana Pulliam [2007] for a sample). My scenario has students taking the role of film consultants for the movie version of *Persepolis* (though they are still to complete the webquest before they read the book), which provides another layer of awareness of media for the students, but the scenario could be easily adapted to other situations, depending on students’ grade or skill level. See Appendix B for the introduction/task handout.

Students are given the introduction to the webquest, and we talk through the assignment’s task. Students choose group members they want to work with or may be grouped through other means. Students then receive their group process sheets (available at the end of this article), which clarify their research tasks by including specific questions for them to answer about their topic and also provide the websites they are to use to answer them. These websites could also be adapted according to suit students’ media literacy skills, but as Firek points out, “It is critical that students are not left to wander aimlessly about the Net” (2003, 75). It is equally critical that the teacher ensure that the sites are still available and suited to the students’ grade, reading, and skill level. There are many sites that could be substituted for the ones I have listed on the process sheets. See Appendix B for the process handouts, which can be modified for your class’ use.

Students need ample time for research, which may be completed during class time or in combination with out-of-class work depending on the in-

ternet resources available to students in school or at home. Because this is a group project, I prefer to have students work together during class. That way, I can monitor the amount of work each student is doing, and they can negotiate within the group to decide what questions each person will be responsible for as well as share their answers with each other.

Creating a Multimedia Presentation

Once students have completed their research, it’s time for them to plan, write, design, and rehearse their presentations for their classmates. Sharing their knowledge with each other and learning from classmates is a key component of the co-learning pedagogy advocated by media literacy education (NAMLE 2007). The first step is for learners to write the script. The “Introduction and Task Sheet” notes that the group time/slide number is computed by the number of persons in the group (two minutes and three slides per person). In theory, each student should have a good idea of the amount of information he or she wants to relay. On the day scriptwriting begins, students should meet briefly in their groups to negotiate how to allot this time (maybe one person has three minutes of material that MUST be shared, and another has only about one minute of vital information). After negotiating their allotments with each other, students will work individually on their scripts and confer with each other as necessary. Along with their scripts, students should plan the pictures they want to use from the websites they’ve explored (see the Library of Congress Copyright website at <http://www.copyright.gov/> for rules about exemption from copyright laws in educational projects or see the Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education (NCTE 2008), available at <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/fairusemedialiteracy>).

Once the scripts are completed, students will need to use computers again in order to work on their presentations. If you or students are unfamiliar with the programs they want to use, many free online tutorials are available for use. Students should confer with each other to design their presentations and work on preliminary organization and timing. Particularly adept students might record the script and insert the sound file into their presentation so they don’t need to talk “live” through the slideshow or use a site like SlideSix to record narration. This strategy helps prevent stage fright in some students and also showcases the media production skills of the group. It may take several days of work for the students to finalize their presentations,

rehearse, and troubleshoot any problems before they are ready to present their research to the rest of the class.

Presentation and Evaluation

All students in the class benefit from the groups’ sharing of their information with each other. The presentations can be the catalyst some students need to research even more deeply into Iran’s culture and history. Students should be encouraged to take notes during the presentations and ask relevant questions of group members afterward. The research project might even be extended into a final project after students read the memoir. I use the rubric shown in Figure 1 to assess the group presentations. If you choose to assign individual grades, student reflections on their group work can help you determine appropriate ones for them.

Figure 1: *Persepolis Webquest Multimedia Presentation Rubric*

Category	Novice	Proficient
Number of Slides	Fewer than three slides per person in group	Three slides per person in your group
Length of presentation	Shorter than 2 minutes per person in group	As long or longer than 2 minutes in group. Not longer than 3 minutes per person in group.
Information	Information is incomplete—questions from webquest are not sufficiently answered or there are limited suggestions for items to include in film	Complete information—questions from the webquest are sufficiently answered and there are ample suggestions for items to include in the film
Slide Layout	Slides use graphics ineffectively or not at all; Excess text used on slides	Slides use graphics effectively to convey meaning; Text on slides is limited and meaningful
Presentation	Students read the slides or have memorized their speech	Students speak extemporaneously (or [bonus] pre-record narration)

A = four or more proficient standards met

B = three proficient standards met

C = three novice standards met

D = four or more novice standards met

Student Reactions and Conclusions

After I designed the *Persepolis* webquest, I offered it to pre-service teachers in my Literacy and Technology class as an option for a final project. While most of the future teachers in my courses see the value of using technology for informal, daily communication, some of them are skeptical about using technology for teaching literature, an attitude that could be diminished by the infusion of media literacy education into teacher education programs. The skeptics see technology as add-ons, as “bells and whistles” that have little to do with literacy. As Jeffrey Wilhelm points out, however, “technological facility is essential to literacy in the twenty-first century” (2003, vii). He and others (Bolter 1991) argue that students who do not use multimedia to read and compose can be considered illiterate today, given that the most powerful tools available for communication are now electronic. This is yet another reason why media literacy education is vital and beneficial to all learners and should be integrated into school curricula.

With the *Persepolis* webquest, I wanted to model for my Literacy and Technology students the ways that technology could enhance the teaching of literature for secondary students, and the webquest uses technology for both research and presentation, skills students are already working on in the classroom. In addition, the webquest uses technologies (the Internet, presentation software) that students are already used to using outside of school. From these future teachers, I was able to get informal feedback on the webquest’s usefulness as a pre-reading strategy for the memoir, just as I had discussed with my previous methods students. The Literacy and Technology students who completed the project felt that the multimodal aspect of the assignment was beneficial for them. Because today’s students are used to seeing images, reading text, and hearing narration all at the same time, they felt that a multimedia presentation was particularly apt for presenting the information gained through internet research. Indeed, Wilhelm (2003) implies that student motivation and satisfaction increase when technology experiences inside and outside of school match. The students who completed the webquest also felt empowered by the choices and freedom that the project offered them. Students were able to choose which aspect of Iran they wanted to explore and did most of the research without my supervision or micro-management of their presentations. Thus, they took charge of the project and completed

it to their satisfaction, based on the evaluation rubric, which clearly spells out the criteria for the grade they wanted. In short, the students who competed the webquest exhibited many of the benefits of using technology in the classroom as Wilhem (2003) outlines: Students drew on multiple intelligences, they brought their home resources into the classroom, they played multiple roles in the classroom (expert, collaborator, researcher), and they developed literacy skills. Perhaps most importantly, they developed insights and opinions on the subject matter and listened to those of others, the very foundation of participating in a rich, exciting classroom.

One surprising area of dissatisfaction the methods students voiced about the webquest was not the amount of work the project involved, but rather the amount of time they were allotted for their presentations. They felt that they had so much information to share that it was difficult to give their topics sufficient development in the time and slide number allotted. One student, for example, lamented that she had to cut her seven-page script down to two and a half pages to meet the time limit. It isn't often that students ask for requirements to be increased, and I took their suggestion to add more time as a sign that they were motivated to find out as much information about Iran as possible as well as interested in sharing all of it with their classmates. They clearly believed that gaining background information on Iran would help them appreciate the memoir more thoroughly.

Figure 2 shows a presentation slide created by one Literacy and Technology student, Jan Renaldo, whose presentation was on Iranian culture. In this slide, she not only discusses the major phases of Iranian art, she also includes specific pictures of representative artwork and relates their characteristics to the period. This slide, which includes pre-recorded narration, shows the culmination of the media literacy education and production skills involved: internet research, selection of information to be shared, selection of slide design and layout, and the integration of sound and pictures for maximum effectiveness during the presentation, all of which require the learner practicing critical thinking skills throughout the process.

Figure 2: Iranian art presentation slide by Jan Renaldo



Broader Implications for Classrooms

Teachers who use this lesson in their classrooms should see an increase in student engagement with the issues and themes developed in *Persepolis* as well as the broader context in which it was written. The change of attitudes and motivation levels in the students who completed the webquest in my class demonstrate that students as well as teachers will benefit from the lesson. They will certainly explode the myth that Iran is a nation of single-minded people out to destroy Americans. They will discover that Iran is a country of individuals with diverse ideas, opinions, classes, and values, a modern nation with many of the same qualities and problems that their own country faces. They will see that the history and culture of Iran is similar in ways to their own, paradoxically similar in its diversity, a lesson which will undoubtedly help them relate personally to Marjane and her experiences during her nation's turbulent times

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Appendix A

Persepolis WebQuest Introduction and Task Sheet

Introduction

Soon we will begin reading the graphic memoir *Persepolis*, the story of a teen-age girl in Iran during the Islamic revolution in the mid 1970's. In order to completely appreciate her story, we need to learn more about Iran and its society, culture, and institutions during that time period, and we will be doing that with the help of a webquest. This may sound like a lot of research, but you will be responsible for only a small part of the entire research project.

The Task:

As consultants for the film *Persepolis* (based on the book you are about to read), your group has been asked to ensure that the film accurately portrays political events, religion, society, and culture in Iran. After researching your chosen area, you will present your findings to the filmmakers (class members) and suggest specific events or items that they should include in the film. After we view the film in class, you will have a chance to modify your recommendations and/or be more specific about where, when, and how the direction might include your information.

Task Objectives:

Students will research information about Iran during the Islamic revolution.

Students will design a multimedia presentation.

Students will present their findings and recommendations to the rest of the class.

Part I The WebQuest Process: Internet Research

In groups, you will be responsible for researching one of the following areas:

- The Shah of Iran—his role in government and reasons for his overthrow
- Islam—major beliefs of the religion and why some religious groups felt the revolution was necessary
- Society in Iran—institutions such as schools, religion, families, government
 - o One group on pre-revolution norms
 - o One group on post-revolution norms
- Culture in Iran—movies, music, art, fashion
 - o One group on pre-revolution culture
 - o One group on post-revolution culture

Part II The WebQuest Task: Multimedia Presentation

Each group will put together a number of slides (three per person in your group, unless otherwise negotiated) for a formal presentation in class. You might use PowerPoint®, SlideSix, or some other program. These slides should be the basis for the information you relay to the rest of the class, but they should not just be slides with written material on them. Use color, pictures, clip art, and text to create an attractive and meaningful presentation. Don't read your slides to us; rather, use notes to speak extemporaneously, or pre-record your narration. Time limit for the presentation is two minutes per person in your group unless otherwise negotiated, so plan your time wisely together and rehearse your timings and presentation together. Your work will be assessed by the Presentation Rubric below. You will be assigned a group grade for your participation in the project in addition to being assigned an individual grade for your reflections on the group work.

Appendix B

Persepolis WebQuest Process Handouts

Culture in Iran

Use the following web pages to answer these questions about Iranian society. Remember that one group is PRE-Islamic revolution, and one group is POST-Islamic revolution.

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Iran
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Iran
- <http://www.iranian.com/music.html>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Iran
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_art
- <http://www.iranian.com/arts.html>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Iranian_musicians_and_singers
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_cuisine
- <http://www.cultureofiran.com/>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_in_Iran
- <http://www.iranian.com/sports.html>

1. Describe and give examples of the major phases in Iranian art. Discuss what kind of art is popular during your time period (pre- or post-revolution).
2. Describe some major Iranian movies, their plots, and directors.
3. Describe major categories of Iranian music. Focus on the most popular kind of your time period (pre- or post-revolution).
4. What kinds of sports are popular in Iran? Who participates, and who observes?
5. Describe Iranian cuisine. What kind of dishes are popular? What are considered delicacies?

Islam

Use the following websites to answer the questions below in preparation for your presentation:

- o <http://www.islam.com/introislam.htm>
- o <http://www.islam.com/AllahAttributes.htm>
- o http://www.internews.org/visavis/islam_in_iran_mstr.html
- o <http://www.islam.com/chronology.htm>
- o http://www.religioustolerance.org/comp_isl_chr.htm
- o <http://www.religioustolerance.org/islam.htm>
- o http://www.internews.org/visavis/islam_rev_mstr.html

1. What are some of the major beliefs of the religion of Islam?
2. How do Islamic beliefs compare to those of other major world religions?
3. Who is Islam's major religious figure? Why? What is the main Muslim text?
4. What was the role of Islamic fundamentalists in the overthrow of the Shah of Iran?

Appendix B (continued)**Society in Iran**

Use the following web pages to answer these questions about Iranian society. Remember that one group is PRE-Islamic revolution, and one group is POST-Islamic revolution.

- <http://www.cultureofiran.com/> (click on “codes of behavior”)
- http://www.internews.org/visavis/women_mstr.html
- <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/ir-iran/edu-education>
- http://www.iranchamber.com/education/articles/educational_system.php
- http://www.iranchamber.com/education/articles/history_higher_education1.php

1. What religions are represented in the population of Iran?
2. What is the role of women in society?
3. Describe the education system, including higher education (universities) in Iran for most of the population.
4. What is the family structure in Iran?

The Shah of Iran

Use the following websites to answer these questions in preparation for your presentation:

- http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mohammad_rezashah/mohammad_rezashah.php
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Reza_Pahlavi_of_Iran
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shah_of_Iran
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3362443.stm

1. When and how did the Shah of Iran (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) come to power? What was the U.S.’s role in his becoming Shah?
2. What kind of government did the Shah lead?
3. When and how did the Shah lose power? What role did Islamic fundamentalists play? Who took over after he lost power?
4. What relation did his exile have to the Iranian hostage crisis (please explain what that was)?