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) notes that homogenous people with very little exposure to 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 source web search 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-
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.

Frequent interaction with 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/46944/470722161202/ 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. The first step is for learners to write the script. The “Introduction and Task Sheet” notes that the group’s production skills are limited, and one 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). Students must consider how their websites are complete; they need to use peers as a reference to make sure their websites are available for their final presentation. If you or students are unfamiliar with the media literacy skills, 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 internet 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 make sure that group members 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 media literacy education advocated by media literacy education (NAMLE 2007).

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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.

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.

References
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
  - One group on pre-revolution norms
  - One group on post-revolution norms
- Culture in Iran—movies, music, art, fashion
  - One group on pre-revolution culture
  - 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://www.cultureofiran.com/
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_in_Iran

1. Describe and give examples of the major phases in Iranian art. Discuss what kind of art is popular during your period of time (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:

- http://www.islam.com/introislam.htm
- http://www.islam.com/AllahAttributes.htm
- http://www.iranian.com/chronology.htm
- http://www.religioustolerance.org/comp_isl_chr.htm

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.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://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)?