Lost in America
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By Douglas McGray

Speak two languages and you’re bilingual. Speak one? You must be American. So goes the old joke. But globalization means that students can no longer remain blissfully unaware. Can Americans open the classroom door, or will today’s youth be unprepared to lead tomorrow’s world?

Christina is a modern, multitasking, American 15-year-old—fiddling with her new iPod, sassing the tall boy slouched beside her, and getting an impromptu lesson in Filipino culture at an after-school program in Oakland, California. “I speak Tagalog and Filipino,” says the group’s counselor, Michelle Ferrer, “two languages from the island where my family comes from.” Christina is puzzled. “The Philippines is an island?” she asks skeptically. Ferrer nods and Christina frowns. “I thought it was in China,” she says. Ferrer tries not to laugh. “Girl, you thought I was Chinese?” she teases gently. “No,” Christina clarifies, “I thought the Philippines was a country in China.”

In California, where Christina lives, more than 1 in 4 of the state’s residents were born outside the United States. Schoolchildren speak more than 60 languages at home. Globalization is everywhere you look. Here in Oakland, an 11-year-old African-American boy has impressed international audiences with his uncanny Chinese arias. In nearby Fruitvale, nearly 100,000 locals turned out last fall for a Mexican Día de los Muertos celebration. To the south, in Silicon Valley, a Bollywood cineplex effortlessly sells out its Hindi screenings. A few blocks from my San Francisco apartment, a shop that specializes in goods from Brazil (the area around Goiania, specifically) shares its block with a Vietnamese restaurant and a yoga studio, where yuppies chant in Sanskrit as they bend and sweat; outside, Caribbean reggaeton blares from the windows of Japanese tuner coupes.

But for all the changes globalization has brought to the average American kid’s cultural and commercial ecosystem, the average classroom has lagged far behind, even in cosmopolitan California. Take foreign languages. In the late 1940s, more than 90 percent of kids who studied a foreign language learned French, Spanish, or Latin. At the end of the century, a radically different era, that figure remained the same. At least two decades after political scientists decided China would be the world’s next major power, only a little more than 1,300 public high school students studied Chinese—just 8 percent of the number studying American Sign Language. More than 25 years since the oil crisis showed the Middle East to be the world’s most vital and volatile region, only about 500 American public high schoolers were enrolled in Arabic classes, while some 175,000 studied Latin instead. Two thirds of American students never studied a second language at all in the year 2000.

That’s just the most obvious anachronism. Many U.S. states have introduced world history classes, but few find time for modern Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. Islam, for instance, makes a single scheduled appearance in California’s history and social studies curriculum, in a survey of ancient societies for 11- and 12-year-olds. That provincial tendency lingers into college. Although half of all college-bound Americans say they hope to study abroad, only 1 percent actually follow through on those plans. And nearly half of those students travel to just four countries in Western Europe: Britain, France, Italy, and Spain. In 2004, Italy attracted more American students than all of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East combined.

As a result, young Americans like Christina represent something of a paradox: surrounded by foreign languages, cultures, and goods, they remain hopelessly uninformed, and misinformed, about the world beyond U.S. borders. In 2002, with their troops occupying Kabul, Afghanistan, and both Washington and the rest of the world debating a possible invasion of Iraq, 85 percent of 18- to 24-
year-old Americans surveyed by the National Geographic Society could not find either country on a map. And it gets worse: Sixty-nine percent failed to find Britain, 29 percent could not find the Pacific Ocean, and nearly a third believed the U.S. population to be somewhere between 1 and 2 billion.

For most of U.S. history, a clique of exclusive universities and military academies trained an elite group of bright young men to handle the nation’s minimal foreign concerns. But America has a different role in the world today, and the world has a different role in America. The U.S. military maintains more than half a million soldiers, intelligence officers, staff, and contractors abroad, and employs some 50,000 foreigners. Together, they operate more than 700 bases in roughly 130 countries—the shadow of America’s interests in the world. At the same time, foreign influence in the United States grows every year. In West Virginia, a state mocked by smug urbanites as a backwater, local businesses did more than $3.1 billion in foreign trade in 2005, and investment from some 75 global firms created more than 30,000 new jobs.

Of course, fretting about public education is something of a national pastime. Every few years a new survey comes out, showing that American schoolchildren lag behind their global counterparts in science and math. That inevitably sends lawmakers and the public into a panic. Soon, we hear, the United States will become a nation of baristas and retail clerks, while Asians leave their kids with the Nannybot, commute to work on cold fusion-powered monorails, and fine-tune the software that will put Microsoft and Google out of business.

And yet, for all the anxiety that science and math education inspires, the state of global languages, politics, history, and culture in U.S. schools may actually be scarier. Whether it is translating and analyzing intelligence intercepts in Arabic and Farsi, guiding American industry through new markets in Asia, collaborating with research partners across the globe, or shaping the foreign policy of the world’s only superpower at the ballot box, young Americans will struggle to bear their responsibilities.

THE HERMIT CLASSROOM

The United States was barely a toddler, in nation years, when public schoolhouses began to spread across the country. It was a radical notion: teaching every poor farm boy or miner’s son to read, write, add, and learn about the great men who founded their democracy, at a time when European governments still considered primary education a privilege. But the movement was rooted in anxiety. America was suddenly a republic, but a republic of foreigners—disparate, multilingual, barely connected to a distant government in Washington, and ill-equipped to weigh matters of state when they cast a vote.

Public education was designed to manufacture citizens. American textbooks appeared, scrubbed clean of continental influence. Georgia legislators actually banned study abroad before the age of 16. Even bitter political rivals of men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson saw the utility in building up a few common heroes. If Americans had nothing in common but America, then public education would unite them.

A homogenizing civic education prevailed without much dissent for more than a century, mostly because new waves of immigrants—Italians, Irish, Eastern Europeans—kept arriving. That ethos did face challenges. When, in the 1840s, German Americans in Cincinnati, Ohio, lobbied for their children to learn German, school administrators feared losing this wealthy, educated community to private schools, so they squeezed German into the curriculum. Later, Italian immigrants put pressure on New York City schools, and in the 1930s, an Italian-American principal offered his kids the country’s first Italian class. Still, traditional ideals endured.

It took two world wars, the rise of an ambitious Soviet Union, and the birth of technologies that exploded any notion of safe distance for the United States to rethink its isolationist bent. Public education would change, too. But if the world outside demanded American attention, American classrooms mostly resisted the call. After all, when the Germans rose in World War I, Americans did
not rush to learn the enemy’s language; they banned it from public schools. (By 1922, just 13,000 American public school students studied German, down from nearly 325,000 in 1915, when only Latin was more popular.) Why would the Cold War proceed any differently?

American education did react to the 20th century’s growing internationalism, at least for a moment, after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik program in the late 1950s. Shaken by Moscow’s achievement, American legislators passed the National Defense Education Act, funding everything from advanced scientific research to foreign-language study. For more than a decade after Sputnik’s flight, language education boomed in a way it never has since. But most of the money went to French and Spanish. And the largesse was short-lived. When budgets tightened in the 1970s, international courses were the first to go, and the number of students in foreign-language classes dropped every year. By 1980, less than 1 in 10 universities required any foreign-language study for admission, down from one third in the 1960s. Nobody seemed concerned.

The globe-spanning perils and opportunities of the Cold War may have preoccupied Washington, D.C., but in education, the fight was at home, and over the past. Take California’s world history curriculum (fairly thorough, by American standards). Children in the seventh and eighth grades study a culturally diverse history of the world, up through the Middle Ages. Due credit is paid to the contributions of great African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American civilizations. But by the time students hit the 10th grade, they reach the Industrial Revolution, and “world” history turns into the history of the United States and Western Europe. “The conservatives will say it’s OK to include the traditions of ancient and medieval cultures,” explains Ross Dunn, a history professor at San Diego State University and coauthor of an influential draft of national history standards in the 1990s, “but that once you get to 1500, the focus should be on the West, because that’s where the action is.”

University campuses, too, became battlegrounds in the 1990s, as students and professors staked out new American identities that put race, gender, or foreign heritage on equal footing with American citizenship. Conservatives lashed out at this “political correctness.” Ironically, though, these fights over what it means to be American rarely considered American identity in a wider world. For all the heartwarming talk about respecting diverse cultures, 92 percent of American undergraduates never take a foreign-language class.

AN INCOMPLETE GRADE

Sputnik fell to Earth and faded from memory. But there would be other opportunities to shake schools out of their provincialism. None seems more striking, in hindsight, than a report commissioned by the White House in 1978. Pointing to unrest in the Middle East, and a line in the 1975 Helsinki Accords that compelled signatories to promote the study of foreign languages, Congressmen Paul Simon and Leon Panetta called on President Jimmy Carter to appoint a commission to assess the state of international studies. Their report, Strength Through Wisdom, was blistering. “Americans’ incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous,” the authors wrote. “The United States requires far more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of potential adversaries, and earn the trust and sympathies of the uncommitted.” And yet, the report argues, “our schools graduate a large majority of students whose knowledge and vision stops at the American shoreline, whose approach to international affairs is provincial, and whose heads have been filled with astonishing misinformation.”

The report’s authors, 25 luminaries of American academia, politics, and the media, proposed more than 100 pages of possible reforms, from requiring international education courses for all teachers in training, to launching regional language centers across the country that would support foreign-language instruction. Congress shrugged. “People who either were children of immigrants, or had language ability, or members [of Congress] who traveled abroad got it,” Panetta recalls. “But there wasn’t broad support for what we were doing, either from the administration or from the congress.” None of the reforms were adopted.
A generation of Americans grew up and left for college. The Cold War ended. The Internet came of age. Falling airfares turned foreign continents into weekend getaway spots. Average Americans developed strong opinions on everything from outsourcing, foreign pharmaceuticals, and global warming, to pandemic disease, terrorism, and the politics of oil. Globalization became a buzzword, and then a simple fact of life. Unsurprisingly, American college students began to seek out new foreign languages and study abroad in greater numbers. But they did so with little encouragement. In 1996, congress actually chopped 20 percent from the budget of the Fulbright Program, which sends American graduates around the world for advanced study. Education reformers devoted most of their energy to math, English literacy, and standardized testing, and many primary schools dropped social studies and foreign languages altogether.

Earlier this year, President George W. Bush finally revived some of the ideas in Strength Through Wisdom, with a new National Security Language Initiative. The modestly funded measure encourages foreign-language study as early as kindergarten, and requests new money to train and certify foreign-language teachers, particularly in so-called critical languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Hindi, and Russian. It also promises to subsidize foreign study for high school and college students, and bring native speakers from abroad to teach in U.S. classrooms.

The business community, too, has started to champion the cause. According to a Committee for Economic Development study, 30 percent of large U.S. firms surveyed in 2002 believed a provincial, monolingual workforce had cost them business opportunities overseas. Even the College Board, a nonprofit organization that administers U.S. exams for college admissions and credit, has started to come around. Only six years ago, it offered two Advanced Placement (AP) exams on the writings of the Roman poet Virgil, and none on the politics, economics, history, and literature of five of the world's continents. It finally introduced a world history exam in 2002, and next year it will offer its first exams in non-European languages—Chinese and Japanese. The College Board’s executive director for the AP program, Trevor Packer, also revealed that test planners are considering a shift that would put much more emphasis on the United States in a global context for a major update to their flagship U.S. History exam. “We have to reflect best practices at the university level,” Packer says. “What we’re finding are courses that do a better job than in the past of integrating U.S. history into global themes.” Because the College Board defines educational rigor in American high schools, any shift in its outlook would have wide repercussions.

It could all begin to add up to another moment for international education in the United States. But the previous moments have been just that—moments. And there are reasons to worry this one will be no different. As The New Republic pointed out in January, the president’s language initiative may promise $24 million to promote foreign-language instruction in K-12 schools, but that seems pretty paltry compared to the $206 million he requested to fund abstinence-only sex education. And ultimately, what happens in American classrooms today is driven by standardized tests, administered by state governments. In California, teachers know that contemporary global themes such as disease, information technology, migration, and environmental policy make up about 10 percent of the “standards” they are supposed to teach in 10th grade world history, but they represent only one question on the 60-question state exam. With so much history to cover, and so much emphasis on test scores, teachers are under pressure to cut out extras. For now, foreign languages and global politics, economics, history, and culture are dispensable.

**WORLD CLASS**

That is not to say there are no bright spots. Ask around, and you will hear stories of individual teachers who slip global context into the curriculum, often with a lot of imagination. “It’s mostly individuals who, because of their personal experiences, value international education, and try to find ways to fit it in,” says Peter Hammer, social studies content specialist for the San Francisco Unified School District. “It takes a great deal of determination on the individual teacher’s part, and support from outside the schools.”
Some adventurous school districts have let their foreign-language programs evolve with the times. When the Washington, D.C., suburb of Fairfax, Virginia, began to attract new immigrants in the 1980s, schools reflected the change. Today, students can study Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Latin, Russian, and Spanish. New York’s Henry Street School takes Chinese-language students on field trips to Chinatown, where they speak Mandarin with curious shopkeepers and restaurant owners, and benefit from an easy and inexpensive study abroad-like experience. And then there is the spread of two-way bilingual immersion schools. At the public Alice Fong Yu elementary school in San Francisco, children learn everything from math to social studies in both Cantonese and English. By the time they reach high school, they are totally bilingual—cognitively wired to learn more languages, and culturally wired to understand America’s place in the world.

A few schools are experimenting even further. At the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, an influential public charter school in the sprawl north of Los Angeles, Eugene Astilla stands at the head of a classroom full of high school freshmen. His students, overwhelmingly Latino and overwhelmingly poor, are dressed in black and white (red and blue are gang colors, and banned in class). Astilla teaches world history at a new satellite school, the Vaughn International Studies Academy. It’s one of eight pilot programs nationwide, funded by the nonprofit Asia Society and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to try to bring the contemporary world to every class in the school day, even science and math.

Today, Astilla asks his kids to compare Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Saddam Hussein. All used violence to stay in power, several suggest. “They used propaganda,” one student points out. “Good one!” Astilla says approvingly. He quizzes the class on facts. “Can someone tell me the name of Saddam’s party?” he asks. “Sunni?” one kid says, hesitantly. “No, but good guess,” Astilla says. “I’ll give you a clue. It’s something you kids don’t take often enough.” A boy in the back raises his hand. “The Shower Party?” he asks, and half the room jumps in at once: “Baath!”

The readings on Hitler and Mussolini are in the standard textbook. The readings on Saddam are downloaded from the Web. And that is how it goes in every class—teachers hit the stuff the state expects kids to know but lead detours out of the textbook to try and put things in a global context. Take a lesson going on next door, on plant biology, where the teacher, Noah DeLeon, mixes overhead slides on photosynthesis with world agriculture maps. He goes over the mechanics of plant reproduction, but also prompts kids to think about the wider meaning of plants, from the debate over corn-derived ethanol as a fuel source to food security around the world. “There’s no curriculum out there,” explains Principal Yvonne Chan. “There isn’t any model.”

All the students at Vaughn take Spanish and Chinese. Because many of them are fluent Spanish speakers, or native Spanish speakers who had to master English, they pick up Chinese quickly—a second foreign language always comes more easily. Next year, the school will begin to offer Arabic as an elective. Neighborhood parents, many of whom speak only Spanish, are among the school’s biggest supporters. “Our children need languages other than Spanish and English to compete globally,” says Imelda Sierra, whose daughter attends the school.

Large American cities have always been international and multicultural, but the nation’s 2000 Census was something of a landmark. For the first time, new immigrants were more likely to settle in a suburb than in a big city such as Los Angeles, Miami, or New York. States that were home to very few recent immigrants a generation ago, including Maine, Minnesota, and North Carolina, are finding new languages and new cultures in their midst.

Of course, cultural diversity does not automatically give a community a global outlook. Many American children of immigrants reluctantly speak two or three languages, but otherwise stay willfully ignorant of their parents’ native countries. White suburbanites may hear Hindi in the neighborhood for the first time, notice a new sari shop at the corner strip mall, develop a regular craving for takeout tandoori, and still think Kashmir is for sweaters. But new immigrants make foreignness immediate for Americans, in a way that citizens of small countries on crowded continents take for granted.
That may be the best hope for a broader commitment to international education in U.S. schools. Whether the United States looks to its growing and dispersing immigrant communities as a resource, though, may depend on how well the nation overcomes some longstanding ideas—namely, that Americans are easily drawn to foreign loyalties, and that public education should be a defense against cultural dissolution. Many critics, for instance, still rail against bilingual education as an un-American accommodation to foreigners. Just look at conservative pundit Tucker Carlson’s reaction to the Bush administration’s National Security Language Initiative. “People are really influenced by their study abroad,” he argued. “Do we want, in other words, the federal government paying, possibly to create more converts to radical Islam? Because that is actually what’s going to happen.”

An inward-looking education system didn’t stop the United States from becoming rich and powerful in the 20th century. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that what worked for previous generations will still work in the future. Scientific research teams have become multilingual, multinational, and multidisciplinary. Businesses are staking out suppliers, partners, and storefronts overseas. Teachers and students must welcome and integrate a growing number of new immigrants into their communities. Soldiers, often teenagers with no education beyond high school, deploy alongside allies from dozens of different countries, and negotiate language and cultural barriers in situations where time and precision can make the difference between lives saved and lives lost. In the 21st century, everyone is a potential diplomat.

But it isn’t just the world that’s changing; it’s the very nature of knowledge. Grammar, spelling, and multiplication tables may remain comfortingly constant, but theories in science, technology, politics, and economics can become dated by the time a textbook publisher goes to press. “What’s different today,” says Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, professor of globalization and education at New York University, “is the rapid rate in which knowledge becomes obsolete. That means that learning has to be focused on cognitive skills.” Think about good computer education: It doesn’t just teach kids to perform a task, it teaches them how to learn unfamiliar technology. The same holds true in global economics, politics, and society, which can shift—and shift the world’s competitive landscape—as fast as a new operating system can turn a two-year-old laptop into an expensive typewriter.

We may live in a democratic age, but the international system is no democracy. The United States can solve crises that entire continents, working together, cannot. It can also sink most treaties, veto any global consensus, undermine the United Nations, and make far-reaching decisions that the rest of the world must live with. Savvy countries have realized that, and angled for influence with American youth. The Chinese government put up funding to encourage the College Board to develop its new AP Chinese exam, and Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal recently donated $40 million to introduce ambitious Georgetown and Harvard students to the Arab world. Americans should be grateful for their concern. In a few years, Christina's disoriented peers will land jobs in Washington, get their first set of business cards from multinational firms, and sit in judgment of U.S. foreign policy every four years. The United States can no longer afford an isolationist education system, any more than the world can afford an isolationist American public.

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