

**“IMPERIALISM TAKES HOLD”**  
A Case Report of Instruction

by Silvia Paloma Garcia-Lopez  
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Professor Shulman, Professor Darling-Hammond  
and Dr. Hammerness  
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## **“IMPERIALISM TAKES HOLD”**

What do you do when your students engage in an impromptu debate that was not part of the planned lesson? This is what happened in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade US History class just as the Progressive Era unit I had been teaching was coming to an end. My essential question for this unit had been, “What kinds of problems exist in American society that lead people to take action for reform?” I wanted them to learn how and why unsatisfied Americans decided to confront the government with the responsibility of creating special legislation to address a variety of social ills. The last assignment the students completed for the unit was a group poster-board project. The poster-board project consisted of showing the achievements made by Progressive Era reformers to address problems such as: consumer protection, unequal wealth distribution, environmental protection, business monopolies, civil rights and political corruption. This project gave them an overall picture of the issues and reforms of the era.

We had spent three weeks addressing these issues and it was time to introduce students to the concept of US imperialism; mainly Manifest Destiny and the Spanish American War. The essential question became, “During a period of industrial growth and government reform, how do Americans protect the nation’s interests?” The concept of imperialism was not necessarily integral to the “Progressive Era,” therefore, my intention was to teach this section of the unit as adjacent to the progressive time period, even though the years overlapped.

There was about a week and a half left before winter vacation. I had but 3 days to wrap up this mini-unit as my cooperating teacher planned to teach the WWI unit in the remaining days. I was feeling pressed for time both in the classes I had to teach, as well

as the classes I had to complete for my degree in my teacher education program. For these reasons, I decided to focus the content of my lessons on the ideals of Manifest Destiny and the events leading to a full blown war against Spain. I wanted my students to gain an understanding of Anglo American ideals for economic and political expansion as well as how these attitudes inevitably resulted in great gains for the US but great losses for the territories and markets they conquered.

The concept of expansion ideals is far from simple, but breaking it down into ideology, actions taken, then results, would allow my students to access it in an intellectually honest way<sup>1</sup>. My classes back at Stanford had served to dispel the myth that students can only learn things at a certain age or level of “readiness.” Bruner’s theory of “intellectual honesty” establishes that any concept can be learned by a child no matter what age because the fundamental ideals in any field are so simple and intuitive that any student can gain access to them when scaffolded adequately. I hoped that once my students gained an understanding of Manifest Destiny, they would begin to grapple with the question, “How does a nation protect its interests?”

My third period US History class has thirty-four juniors age 16 and 17, and two 18 year old seniors who are repeating the course for graduation credit. The class is ethnically diverse, composed of Anglo American, Mexican-American, Filipino-American, Portuguese-American, Asian-American, and British (1) students. This class represents the general make-up of the school except for African American students who make up about 5% of the student population. This year, two students have transitioned from ELD courses into this mainstream class and struggle to keep up. Other special needs include about eight students who read well below grade level as well as 4 students

who could very well be A students in an Honors/AP US History. Every lesson is a challenge in order to meet the needs of this diverse population as well as learning abilities.

Although these students are typical of the school, they are not typical of neighboring communities. Santa Ines High was recently classified a “basic aid” school by the state of California. The school rests in the heart of the Silicon Valley, characterized by cutting edge technology and a high standard of living. However, over half of SIH’s students come from lower income households from Santa Ines and San Juan. For example, the technology resources available pale in comparison to neighboring districts and a smaller percentage of students go on to four year institutions.

Being that most of my students had a background or ancestry of colonialism, I wanted to provide an arena where they could safely express their thoughts and opinions on issues that affect their lives or the lives of their ethnic group. By introducing Manifest Destiny and exploring economic and political expansion practices, I hoped my students would start to question the path the US took. My sense was that this topic was culturally relevant to all students<sup>2</sup> because of their experience as members of underrepresented, non-dominant groups in American society. Culturally relevant teaching taps into student’s prior knowledge and opinions about the curriculum just as Deborah Juarez did in her piece about an immigration unit she taught to a diverse classroom in the East Bay Area. I expected my students to be very engaged in the concept of Manifest Destiny just as Juarez’ students were engaged in a discussion on the justifications of immigration. Furthermore, my encounter with the ideals and repercussions of Manifest Destiny

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<sup>1</sup> Bruner, Jerome S. The Process of Education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Juarez, Deborah Archuleta. “A Question of Fairness: Using Writing and Literature to Expand Ethnic Identity and Understand Marginality,” Inside City Schools. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1999.

outraged me as a college student. I expected my students to grapple with these issues not only because it made the US what it is today, but also because the critique continues every time the US intervenes in the affairs of less developed nations. The unit question could transform into a broader dilemma of, “Who *decides* how a nation protects its interests when it *affects other* nations and peoples?”

As I planned my lesson, I was disappointed with the meager amount of time I had to present my students with the concept of Manifest Destiny and expansionism. My students would certainly have prior knowledge from their own status as minority groups in the US or from their ethnic heritage to hook them into the lessons. I asked myself, why didn't my CT and I plan far ahead to avoid squeezing this in before vacation?

In order to give my students a brief overview, I chose to teach the students about the Spanish American War using the slide lecture material provided by Teachers Curriculum Institute developed at Stanford University. I had designed handouts for students to write a caption sentence, take “reporter’s” notes as if they worked for a big newspaper, and create a headline for the event discussed in each slide. The purpose of the headline was to further develop student understanding of the impact of “yellow journalism” during the Progressive and Spanish American War time period. Through the entire unit, the students had learned about the effect sensationalized journalism had in convincing the American public to sway their beliefs, whether or not what they read was based on truth. The swaying of public opinion would be a connection between the push for reforms seen in the last unit and a push for war in this mini-unit. At the end of this mini-unit, students would create their own “front page” of a newspaper including their

headline, a relevant picture, caption, and 1-2 paragraph article sensationalizing the event they chose to depict.

After wrapping up the Progressive poster group presentations on Wednesday, it was time to introduce the concept of US expansionism. The first slide I planned to show was a map of North America showing US expansion into the Louisiana Territory, Oregon, Washington, Texas, 1/3 of Mexico, and Alaska. My lesson question was, “How did the US become the size that it is today?” The term “size” in my mind, was broad enough to include political and economic power, however, I wanted to keep the question as open as possible for all of my students to understand. During the slide lecture I would explain the economic and political aspects of this expansion.

As I pointed to various areas on the continent, only one student, Chris, called out, “Louisiana Purchase from France...” I explained and then rephrased the question after a pause, “Ok, think back to the beginning of the nation. The US was a mere 13 states located along the east coast. Then what? The nation moves west towards the frontier. And then within a small period of time, near the turn of the century, the US expands clearly across the continent and even overseas. What could explain how the US increased its size?” I received a few more responses like, “Purchased land,” “Steal from Native Americans,” and, “Battle!” The students were warming up a bit so I moved on to introduce the white American belief as the “superior race.”

Unfortunately, there was little more reaction from my students as to the magnitude of US expansion across the continent, nor to the ideals of Manifest Destiny. I was hoping to explain the details of Manifest Destiny in response to questions about the origin of these ideals and the extent of their realization. My students sat quietly at their

desks writing, resting their heads on the desk, or staring at the slide. There was little to no reaction from the students as to how these ideals of a superior race were the driving force behind expansion nor an opinion about them. Instead, students took notes diligently and asked me questions about date of the map and the formulation of “headlines.”

Perhaps this was an “off” day for them or maybe for me? Perhaps they were distracted by the headline assignment? I followed their lead and gave them examples of sensationalized headlines corresponding to the slide. Then, I gave students a minute to share their headlines with a partner. I called on a few students to share their headlines with the entire class just before the bell rang and class was over.

I went home satisfied that they learned the process of creating headlines to “sell” newspapers but I wondered if this part of the unit was getting in the way of my own goals. I decided that the rest of the slide lecture would provide the students with more insight to the magnitude of Manifest Destiny ideals. If they could remember anything from this unit, I wanted them to remember what the “moral obligation of the superior race” led Anglo Americans to pursue at the turn of the century. After the slides, I could design a lesson to debrief the validity of US practices and policies abroad. Maybe a discussion like this would result in some constructive criticism.

On Day 2, I expected the students to listen, comment briefly, and take diligent “reporters notes” from the lecture. As I gave the lecture and showed the slides, my students’ difficulty creating headlines from their notes did not quickly diminish as anticipated. Instead, they created headlines that *opposed* US actions. They had turned the ideals around and channeled their efforts into resistance to imperialism. For example, Ngoc raised her hand after we viewed the slide showing the explosion of the Maine.

“How about, ‘Spain Wrongly Accused.’ as a headline for this event?” At that moment, I could not see past their misunderstanding of the headline task to see that they were actually thinking critically about imperialistic actions in their own way. I kept thinking, I have to show them how to sensationalize pro-Manifest Destiny ideals in their headlines and articles!

I kept these thoughts to myself as I paused and explained, “You’re on the right track as far as wording that attracts attention, but remember that yellow journalists at this time were trying to gather, not put down support for war against Spain. Let’s hear another headline to give us more examples. Joe?” Joe looked up from his paper. He hadn’t raised his hand but he had been taking a lot of notes during the discussion.

“Um...Did Spain Really Do It?”

I responded with a question, “What would you like the readers of your newspaper to believe?” Joe was silent. “Who was blamed for the sinking of the Maine regardless of evidence?” After some silence, Craig stepped in and read his headline, “My headline is, ‘Time for US to pay Spain back!’ This makes people wanna fight you see.” James shared next, “Yeah, you see people thought it was Spain’s fault and they wanted us to go into war so I put, ‘The Blame Belongs to Spain’ for my headline.”

I followed up their comments by explaining, “Manifest Destiny meant that Americans felt they had a *right* and *moral obligation* to intervene on behalf of Cubans, with whom they sympathized. Your headlines need to reflect the ideals of Manifest Destiny and convince the public to buy your paper.” “Joe, how could you revise your headline?” In a low voice he responded, “Spain did it!” I nodded then gave them a few

more minutes to complete this section before moving onto the next slide showing the battle at San Juan Hill, Cuba.

As they examined the American troops in the slide, Tina, one of the seniors in the class who brings in a lot thoughtful and controversial comments, raised her hand. “There are plenty of problems in the US like crime and homelessness so why is the US getting into other countries’ affairs and not taking care of their own problems?” I contained my urge to jump for joy. Finally, they began to inquire about the fairness issues of US intervention abroad. This was the turning point in the lecture that I had expected to draw out of them from this mini-unit.

My class almost immediately jumped into an informal debate about whether the US should “police the world” or pay attention to problems at home. Craig and Sarah talked over Tina as they took the opposing side of the argument. “Because who’s gonna take care of the issues in other countries if we don’t do it? There might...” Sarah began. Craig interrupted with a louder tone, “The US has to do it. If we don’t get involved then revolutions might get out of hand and hurt our business interests and we’ll have to get involved anyway.” Others chimed in with, “Cuz we’re the best!” “We have the most power.” Sarah regained her momentum and stated, “What I was gonna say is that there might be an even bigger war if there isn’t a strong hand to get in and settle the conflict.” The exchange of opinions was energizing for myself and the whole class. Everyone was sitting up straighter now and I turned the lights on to get their attention. My concern was that they would fall into criticizing each other rather than *debating the opinions* they were presenting.

Tina rolled her eyes and I began to restore order to the discussion. “Ok everyone, I’m glad you are evaluating and critiquing what the US did at this time and I want to hear what *everyone* is saying. But, we all need to talk *one at a time* so everyone can hear and have a chance to respond. Tina presents a very important point of view. Many Americans felt that way at the turn of the century. They called US expansionist actions ‘imperialistic’ and protested. They became known as the ‘anti-imperialists’ at the time and wanted the US to focus on its own problems at home. Then over here we have Craig and Sarah who brought up the ‘expansionist’ or ‘imperialist’ camp. This is also a valid point of view. Let’s continue, one by one. Kelvin?”

“Well, I think that it is not the US business to try to start a war. The relationship with Cuba is going to be like a power thing just like it is or was between Spain...” “Can the US just start a war whenever? Like what are the rules about this?” Anthony asked, confused. I briefly responded that the US needed popular support to go to war, hence the newspaper assignment. Greg asked, “This is why we have like a united nations to keep the world in order. Did the UN get involved to tell the US to butt out of the Philippines?” I told Greg there was no UN but I’d get back to his question later. The discussion continued and opinions were clearly divided. A couple who were not arguing raised their hands cautiously to ask, “Why does the US have to do this to ‘protect interests’? I don’t get it.”

I was not prepared to answer these questions nor was I prepared about how I would respond to the following questions: “Ms. Lopez, what is your opinion about the US actions during this Manifest Destiny stuff?” “Does it make you mad?” “Who gave the US the right to oppress people?” “Who defines what it means to civilize people in the

Philippines?” I received an influx of all these questions and more. The planned and very structured slide lecture turned into a spontaneous debate about US ideals and respect for self-determination of other nations like Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines. I had to admit that I did not feel comfortable with the level of chaos in the class even though it was very low.

I stopped discussion for a moment and asked for their attention on the overhead projector screen. I attempted to address Greg’s earlier question with knowledge I have about world order. I drew a quick sketch about the balance between two world powers, the US and USSR during the Cold War. I drew this to show them the balance created by two sides maintaining world order. My intention was to contrast this with the lack of balance or “police” organization during the Spanish American War to check US expansion. This got them thinking a moment but a minute later, the level of disorder resumed as questions flew my way and debates drifted from one side of the classroom to the other. I was both pleased that they were thinking but overwhelmed at how to organize or channel the discussion. The bell rang too soon to wrap up the discussion and I would have to wait to see them again on Monday. I had a lot of thinking to do for the last day of the mini-unit.

Given my international relations background, the turn this lesson took was exciting as well as challenging. I tried my best to explain politics of world order and peace keeping organizations such as NATO. After class, I didn’t think this was the best route to take. Presenting the model of world order between two superpowers was not the most effective way to challenge my students to think of the broader picture. I think this side tracked them from the main ideals of Manifest Destiny. Instead, I should have

revisited these ideals and challenged the students to think about how this way of thinking served as a justification for imperialists of the period. This would lead toward developing skills in historical empathy. Teaching history involves teaching the students how to place themselves in the shoes of those who lived through the times we study.

This case has made vivid for me the repercussions of shoving a lot of content into a few days. I wanted my students to understand the concept of manifest destiny, however, I did not spend enough time on it to be successful. I rushed through it assuming understanding was there from the first slide. I should have taken the time to truly teach it in an intellectually honest way. Bruner explains that any concept can be learned by a child no matter what age but this also means that enough time and scaffolding must be spent for students to learn concepts in depth. Students must learn concepts in depth in order to be able to apply them to an authentic task. I tried to teach the concept of manifest destiny without thinking about the implications of depth over breadth to foster critical thinking skills<sup>3</sup>. I could have made the concept of manifest destiny more vivid and accessible if I had slowed down and thought about how to transform the curriculum to better support my students. As a history teacher who has a lot of content to squeeze into a year, I must remind myself that coverage is my enemy. My teaching can only be strengthened by focusing on depth of understanding of key concepts, no matter how complex the concept can be. What's important is that my students learn something well, instead of forget everything they glossed over in a slide lecture. In retrospect, my students got a taste of Manifest Destiny but took hold of imperialism and the main topic of discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> Heller J.I. and Gordon, A. "Lifelong Learning." Educator, 6.1. Graduate School of Education, University of California at Berkeley, pp. 4-19. (1992)

When my students took hold of imperialism, I did not realize right away that they were being critical thinkers. This was one of my goals of the lesson. In this case, I was blinded by the fact that they were not debating the ideals of Manifest Destiny. However, now I realize the important thing is that they were grappling with imperialism, an extension from the original lesson. During the discussion, I did my best to value students' opinions and criticisms of the US. I let the discussion flow with a bit of chaos because I was hesitant to interrupt and squelch their participation. The emotions that were coming out as they debated were the very reactions that I had been looking for on day 1 of the three-part lesson. I had prematurely given up the idea that they would "react" to Manifest Destiny because they were very caught up in the formulation of headlines.

Then, as I look back on day 2, I think it was naïve of me to expect that they would simply be bored and quiet through the slide lecture without questioning US actions in territories close to them. Perhaps this is a case of a teacher getting bored herself and giving up on the idea of sparking interest with a culturally relevant topic. I started to think that maybe the topic was not culturally relevant at this place and time as it was for me when I was in high school. When I started teaching on day 2, somehow I figured their critical thinking questions would not arise until I was ready to address on them the third day. I assumed that it would take much more "pulling" and scaffolding to get them to think critically about history. I imagined myself scaffolding the newspaper projects for part of the period before posing some provocative questions like, "What right does a nation have to protect its interests when they interfere with the self-determination of another nation?" Of course looking back now, I see how unrealistic it was for me to hope

for deep understanding of Manifest Destiny and current expansionist actions by the US in just three days!

However, working with provocative questions like this is one of the main reasons that I came into teaching. Here, I had the discussion of ideas in front of me but I should have been more prepared. This case makes me wonder about other student teachers and tenured teachers in my position. Student teachers especially, do not have sole control over the curriculum. If I were to do it again in 2-3 days, it would be more effective to throw out the newspaper project and focus on Manifest Destiny and the consequences of this mode of thought. Teaching subjects that involve oppression and balance of power are delicate and important issues that need more scaffolding, and direction.

For example, I could have had students fill out a matrix with three columns, labeled ideals, actions, and results. Before beginning the slide lecture, the first few lessons could have focused on instilling depth of understanding about the economic, political, and ideological ideals of the US at the turn of the century. I could have led the students in fact finding tour to fill in the boxes of the matrix with actions taken by the US reflecting an economic, political, and ideological way. The students could share each event they found and justify how it related to or was a product of Americans' belief as the superior race in the world. This plan of action would be more appropriate in the long run. I would achieve my goal of leading my students to an understanding of Manifest Destiny, before debating issues of imperialism. Nevertheless, I needed to be prepared to teach this culturally relevant topic in a sensitive and thorough way whether it be in two days or ten. The task should have matched and reinforced the concept of Manifest Destiny in order to meet my original goals.

I would not however, throw out this unit entirely. I wanted to teach Manifest Destiny to my students in what Bruner calls, “an intellectually honest way.” And that means I need to work with the concept and develop way to transfer my own knowledge to my students. With more scaffolding and time spent on the key concepts, teachers in my position can make better decision about the content in order to organize more effectively to reach the students in an intellectually honest manner. Students can learn difficult concepts at any age if they can participate in collectively constructing the knowledge. Instead of asking the students to write headlines in a style that reflected the attitude of Manifest Destiny, I could have asked them to write an editorial to the paper with their opinion of US practices and policies during this period of expansion. Narrowing the scope of the unit and focusing on one essential question about Manifest Destiny would have been most effective in the limited amount of time that I had. Teachers bound within a tight timeframe should focus on what they want to provide students’ as enduring knowledge, such as the concept of Manifest Destiny.

Furthermore, a teacher can not always be sure where the “turning point” will be for her students. In this case, my turning point happened the instant I was exposed to Manifest Destiny as a high school and college student. This lead me to assume that my students would be as interested in my lessons. However, a teacher can not really know what it would look like until I the lesson is taught. In this case, the class had a turning point when unexpected in the form of a bursting informal debate in class. I have learned that my students’ strengths and motivation for discussions about controversial topics like imperialism show that these issues can be used as great learning tools. When I think back to the things they said, it makes me look forward to future debatable discussion topics to

encourage learning. My students need to see history from both sides of the lens and be able to grapple with their points of view in class. Presenting history as static knowledge is not motivating enough. My students need to participate in the learning process as well.

One of my visions for teaching history is to make students aware of the periods of justice as well as the periods of injustice in our country's history. I think it is important for student to think critically about the events and ideals that led to the status of the nation that we live in today. In reality, my students did learn something about the US role in world politics, economics, and ideology, which were all part of my goal. There are two sides to every issue and the debate about imperialistic actions made that evident. My students seized the opportunity to discuss something that was culturally relevant to their lives and ancestry even if it didn't take off from the first slide as hoped. Overall, I was trying to teach something that I cared about and in the end my students cared about it but in their own way, from their own angle. Imperialism indeed, took hold in this case.

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