Fall Out in the Classroom
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During the Winter Quarter 1996 two colleagues, Valerie Bystrom, English/Literature and Maureen Nutting, History and I taught a Coordinated Studies Program entitled Fall Out: Wars, Sex and Revolutions: Asia and the Americas 1945-1995. Fall out meant not only the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings but also the use of pesticides and other destructive substances either in peace or during war times. Considering the range of topics readings included Rachel Carlson’s Silent Spring, Alejo Carpentier’s Explosion in a Cathedral for French inspired revolutions in the Caribbean; China’s Cultural Revolution was connected with Wild Swans, Vietnam with When Heaven and Earth Changed Places while the Cuban Revolution was approached from personal experiences. The Cold War was introduced in connection with the atomic bombings, political/diplomatic relations with Russia and the role Korea played at the time. The changing social position of American women during and after WWII was also another issue. The basic idea was to provide as general a background as possible for the fifty years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A Coordinated Studies Program is one in which a subject, in this case, Asia and the Americas is studied from different viewpoints and disciplines. Its format includes lectures, readings, discussions, films and videos. The class met four days per week for a total of 18 weekly hours, including two afternoons set for seminars. Each seminar group consisted of one third of the enrolled students and an instructor. Students set up the rules to follow and conducted the seminars. Our role was mostly to provide information when needed, but was not construed as influencing the student’s views. While seminars were primarily devoted to the discussion of the required readings, e.g., books, essays and other material, the approach taken was holistic, in the sense that connections were to be made between all these disparate topics using the readings, visuals, lectures, etc. as stepping stones.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki set the tone and provided the foundation for the course, as they were the first issues that were studied. Besides reading Masuji Ibuse’s Black Rain, J.W. Treat’s Writing Ground Zero and pro and con essays on whether or not the bombs should have been dropped, we visited the exhibition Nagasaki Journal at the Seattle Central Art Gallery. Two guest speakers talked about their experiences with radiation: one was a “down winder” from Hanford and the other was a Japanese-American survivor from Hiroshima. They also participated in a larger presentation, which took place at a local theater and was open to the public, in which the moral issues of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were discussed. In addition Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams was shown in class.

When in 1987 I took part in my first CSP I introduced the idea of an art project as a requirement for the course; this was essentially an extension of what I had been doing in my discrete courses. For the project students were required to create an art piece, whether painting, sculpture, collage, performance, musical composition or any other form of personal expression of their choice. But the works had to reflect issues, attitudes and/or ideas that had been learned throughout the course. At the end of the quarter they were presented to the class. My role was to provide technical advice, but not to dictate what students were to do. Students learned that visual images, theatrical performances and music are languages in their own right, but different from speech or the written word in the way they communicate. From the art projects we all learned what had been important for students in general and for each student in particular. At the Fall Out CSP it became very obvious that, while the main topic of interest had been Hiroshima/Nagasaki followed by that on pesticides, students had been able to make connections between the different
issues discussed in class. I believe this accomplishment constitutes the most important purpose in education and yet it is the least developed, given the general emphasis on compartmentalizing information and knowledge.