

My Cambodia and *My Cambodian America*

Directed by Risa Morimoto

Produced by Rylan Sekiguchi and Risa Morimoto

Edgewood Pictures, 2014

18 minutes (*My Cambodia*), 13 minutes (*My Cambodian America*), color

Curriculum materials are by Rylan Sekiguchi for the Stanford University Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE). Films and related materials are available at stanford.io/1sl162V.

Reviewed by Van Anh Tran

The traditional high school history classroom presents dominant narratives as facts. This is not a surprise. It was not until after I had become a history teacher, however, that I understood the intentional effort a teacher must put into finding (often creating) and implementing culturally relevant, competent, and responsive curriculum for the classroom.



Screenshot from *My Cambodia*

I was born and raised in one of the largest Vietnamese ethnic enclaves in the United States. I grew up hearing stories of war, redemption, and community that did not make its way into my high school US history textbook. This eventually pushed me to become a history teacher, and I currently teach Modern World History for high school sophomores. In my current role, my most rewarding moments come from being able to push students' thinking beyond the limits of the

classroom and connect that thinking to themes that prevailed in the past and continue to this day.

Curriculum resources such as *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America*, available online for no charge, allow teachers to incorporate alternative historical narratives into their classes in an engaging manner. In the age of Common Core and an increased emphasis on analytical thinking, presenting personal stories and histories to students gives them an opportunity to learn content more easily while creating a space for them to learn and engage with people, nations, cultures, and beliefs that are not commonly highlighted in the traditional history curriculum. This pushes students to expand on their own thinking and worldview.

SPICE provides a detailed lesson plan for the films *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America* in addition to an “Into Activity” for the unit and classroom presentation slides that focus on the main themes of the unit. This structure provides guidance for a classroom teacher, while still leaving room to revise the curriculum to fit needs of his or her students. Before beginning this unit, however, I advise that teachers examine where exactly a unit like this would fit into their larger plan. The *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America* unit is not one that should be introduced without context. SPICE indicates which standards the unit plan meets—which is crucial to the implementation of the unit.

For my own classroom, I use the *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America* unit during my larger project on genocide. Chronologically, the Holocaust is oftentimes the only exposure that students have to the concept of genocide in world history. While the Holocaust contains a plethora of raw and powerful content, themes, and lessons, it is often difficult to incorporate other voices impacted by genocide into the unit. To do

the *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America* unit justice, teachers must appropriately frame the history of Cambodia into the context of larger themes such as power structures, different perspectives, and storytelling. That way, when students participate in the activities presented in the unit, such as the one on identity or historical knowledge, students will be able to have a clear frame of reference to understand why these concepts are crucial to not only the past, but also the present and future.

The themes presented in the curriculum are complex, including cultural loss, the refugee experience, and Cambodian-American issues. I suggest being selective about incorporating these themes. Some of the themes are very specific and, in my classroom, might distract from the larger themes of the unit, including power and perspective. For that reason, I will choose not to focus too much on Buddhism, Angkor Wat, or the Cambodian Civil War. While these themes are important and essential to deeply understanding the Cambodian Genocide, I do feel that it is more important for me to be able to teach fewer themes well, rather than spreading myself too thin.

The documentary films included with this curriculum are one of the most powerful tools in the unit. Being able to see and hear the sights and sounds of Cambodia will support student understanding, build empathy, and allow for connections to be made. In my classroom, I will choose to divide this documentary into parts and intersperse segments of the film with activities to allow students to engage with the material through different modes.

Ultimately, *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America* make the life of a teacher much easier and attempt to address the planning needs that go into curriculum development—especially under a time crunch. To be able to easily implement the unit as designed is a huge step forward for history curricula.



Screenshot from *My Cambodian America*

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