



# Discovering Choices in the World Geography Classroom



Afghan Market and Scholars Online video.

SOURCE: MARKET PICTURE: U.S. ARMY STAFF SGT. RUSSELL LEE KLIKA. JENNIFER FLURI

## Brittany Berry

Like most teachers, I am a prolific hoarder of classroom resources. Videos, graphic organizers, news articles, simulations... I just can't help myself. In my defense, world geography, by its very nature, requires a constant search for up-to-date materials that are relevant, flexible, and age appropriate. The curriculum materials available through the *Choices* Program have provided me with a continual supply of "choices" of resources and activities for my students. Better yet, I have the option of purchasing all the units in PDF format saving myself more binders, sleeve protectors, and the need for another file cabinet.

## The Choices Program: History and Current Issues for the Classroom

The *Choices Program* is based out of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Quoting their website, "The program seeks to empower young people with the skills, knowledge, and participatory habits to be engaged citizens who are capable of addressing international issues through thoughtful public discourse and informed decision making." Through their approach to civic education, the *Choices* materials offer activities that promote collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and media literacy.

The catalog of materials includes units in current issues, world history, and American history. Each unit is available in print or in a PDF format you can download from their website. Each comes with a student text and a teacher resource book. Several iBooks are also available, and more are in the works. Within the units, teachers will find detailed background readings, primary sources, role-playing and decision-making activities, and a variety of other

supplemental resources such as mapping activities or personal narratives. Online, teachers can find more supplemental materials for units including graphic organizers, videos, images, and links to useful websites.

The *Choices Program* also maintains a website with great variety of free educational materials. Yes, FREE! The "Teaching with the News" section offers online activities and lessons on a variety of current international issues. For example, teachers can find a lesson on the Iraq refugee crisis that has students exploring the roots of the crisis through firsthand accounts both in text and video.

The specific objectives of this *Teaching with the News* lesson are to

- Become familiar with the terms "refugee" and "internationally displaced person"
- Gain an understanding of the causes and scope of the Iraqi refugee crisis
- Explore first-hand accounts of the Iraqi refugee crisis
- Explore U.S. policy options towards Iraqi refugees

The lesson begins with a discussion of what students know about the recent war in Iraq and how they think the war impacted people in the country. After watching *Scholars Online* videos, students make predictions of what life is like for refugees and why so many people (20% of Iraq's population!) became refugees. Then, in small groups, students research a specific Iraqi refugee. All information is provided and the lesson concludes with students considering what U.S. policy should be in dealing with the refugee crisis, and who—the U.S. government, the international community, or countries in the region—

should be responsible for the refugees. Again, all material, including several short videos, is included.

## This Teaching with the News lesson addresses the following Social Studies TEKS for World Geography:

- 17: Culture.** The student understands the distribution, patterns, and characteristics of different cultures. The student is expected to:
- 17 C:** compare economic, political, or social opportunities in different cultures for women, ethnic and religious minorities, and other underrepresented populations.
- 18: Culture.** The student understands the ways in which cultures change and maintain continuity. The student is expected to:
- 18A:** analyze cultural changes in specific regions caused by migration, war, trade, innovations, and diffusion.
- 18B:** assess causes, effects, and perceptions of conflicts between groups of people, including modern genocides and terrorism;

Another free resource available from *Choices* is *Scholars Online* videos. This extensive database of streaming, short videos features university scholars answering critical questions related to the *Choices* curriculum units. While these videos are designed to be used with *Choices* units, many can easily be used as stand-alone videos as well.

## Choices in the World Geography Classroom: Curriculum Units

One of the most useful qualities of the materials is the ability to pick and choose the resources that best align with your students' needs and the TEKS as well as

the amount of time you have to spend on the topic. For example, the background readings are organized into multiple sections by topic or chronology and come with both regular and an advanced study guide for students. In world geography, I think of the curriculum materials in two areas of study: global issues and regional topics.

## Global Issues

There are numerous resource options for teaching students about contemporary global issues including nuclear weapons, immigration, genocide, and human rights to name a few. Upon teaching students the key elements of economic geography, I have used readings and other resources out of the “International Trade: Competition and Cooperation in a Globalized World” unit. The background readings in this unit introduce geography students to changes in world trade including the processes behind globalization. There are also readings on free trade agreements such as NAFTA and trade organizations such as the WTO. In part II of the reading activity, pros and cons of free trade are addressed as are trading policies in specific nations. A favorite activity of mine is one of the optional lessons which has students evaluate personal profiles of fictional individuals around the world to determine what impact world trade has on a variety of people from differing backgrounds. This unit includes an activity where students work in groups to stage a mock Congressional Committee to debate what key values should guide U.S. policies on foreign trade. The unit ends with students developing their own policy on foreign trade.

## Regional Topics

The “Current Issues” series of units offers materials well suited for a high school world geography classroom. There are individual units devoted to numerous regions and nations including China, Russia, Mexico, South Africa and the Middle East to name a few. One of my favorite units is the award winning “The United States in Afghanistan”. Through this unit students are introduced to the people and history of Afghanistan, as well as the rise of the Taliban and the roots of the current war. One student activity that is included, “The Geography of Afghanistan,” has students explore the role the nation’s location and physical geography have played in influencing its history, people, and culture.

The specific objectives of this activity are for students to:

- Practice map-reading skills

- Identify major geographical landmarks
- Explore ethnic distributions in Afghanistan and Pakistan

The lesson begins with students completing Part I of the student reading, which includes information on life in rural and urban Afghanistan as well as geographic information on the regions of the nation. Students then brainstorm answers to the following questions:

- “How does the geography affect Afghanistan?”
- “How has physical geography affected history in Afghanistan?”

In small groups, students then work with various maps to find answers to these questions and share their conclusions. The lesson provides additional guiding questions to use as prompts for a concluding discussion on the way geography has impacted Afghanistan’s history. In case you are not an expert in Afghanistan’s geography, there are ample Scholars Online videos that can accompany this unit to assist your students (and you) in completing this activity!

Like all Choices units, students complete several lessons and activities that lead them up to the options role play. The role-playing assignment requires them to think critically by applying what they have learned to evaluate different policy options. After engaging in a brainstorming activity to clarify their individual thoughts and values, students present different policy foreign policy options the U.S. can take in regards to the role of the United States in Afghanistan. After the options role play, students need to develop their own policy option, based on their own values and beliefs, on what role they think the U.S. should play in Afghanistan.



Iraq refugee boy.

SOURCE: UNICEF/UNICEFIRAN ON FLICKR

The *United States in Afghanistan* unit addresses the following **High School U.S.**

### History TEKS:

**1 History.** The student understands how geography and processes of spatial exchange (diffusion) influenced events in the past and helped to shape the present. The student is expected to:

1A: analyze the effects of physical and human geographic patterns and processes on the past and describe their impact on the present, including significant physical features and environmental conditions that influenced migration patterns and shaped the distribution of culture groups today.

**6: Geography.** The student understands the types, patterns, and processes of settlement. The student is expected to:

6A: locate and describe human and physical features that influence the size and distribution of settlements; and

6B: explain the processes that have caused changes in settlement patterns, including urbanization, transportation, access to and availability of resources, and economic activities.

**14 Government.** The student understands the processes that influence political divisions, relationships, and policies. The student is expected to:

14A: analyze current events to infer the physical and human processes that lead to the formation of boundaries and other political divisions;

14C: analyze the human and physical factors that influence the power to control territory and resources, create conflict/war, and impact international political relations of sovereign nations such as China, the United States, Japan, and Russia and organized nation groups such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU).

**15 Citizenship.** The student understands how different points of view influence the development of public policies and decision-making processes on local, state, national, and international levels. The student is expected to:

15A: identify and give examples of different points of view that influence the development of public policies and decision-making processes on local, state, national, and international levels.

## Website

The Choices Program: [www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu)

## References

*The United States in Afghanistan*. 2011. Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University. Print.

*Brittany Berry is a teacher in Round Rock ISD and has taught world geography and Pre-AP world geography at Westwood High School in Austin for the last 5 years.*