

Building International Community at a Private IEP School

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to share some thoughts on the promises and pitfalls of community building among international students. The specific population I have in mind is comprised of the students enrolled in a private English language school in Northern California, where I am employed as the academic director. The size of the student body ranges roughly from 150 to 300 depending on the season, and students hail from dozens of countries across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. I have observed that, when these young adults come together from across the globe to live and study English in the United States, a natural, organic community-building process takes place.

For teachers of English to non-native speakers, the central purpose of the profession is clear: to help students become proficient in their use of the English language. But most of us are aware that there is something more than language acquisition going on daily in our classrooms. In fact, every day we are participants in a grand experiment in international living. Each day we interact with students from vastly different cultures, and we witness these students interacting with each other. Each class period is an opportunity to help our students build community. It's a special situation, one which we would do well to explore. For, if it is true that international relationships on a broad political scale are built out of mutual interests, stereotypes, and varying degrees of cross-cultural understanding and appreciation or lack thereof, then we should not overlook opportunities to build healthy international relations in microcosm right in our own schools.

Although the cultural differences of the students, coupled with individual personalities, can sometimes give rise to tensions and disagreements, for the most part international interaction is a process of growth and development. Often the outcome is friendship. Friendships spring up

among both obvious and not so obvious configurations of students, and may endure long after the return flight home. Even if teachers and staff take a completely hands-off approach, the garden of international community will grow, although without care it may become wild and weedy. There is a role for school personnel in tending this garden and enabling it to flourish, but it is important to keep in mind that too much attention is also not good. If we keep digging up the roots in an effort to see how the plant is progressing, as the adage goes, we risk having no plants at all.

But to fully answer the question of our role as school personnel, it makes sense to pose two questions: (1) What are some of the major obstacles to building international community? And (2), What are the ingredients for building successful community at an English language school for international students?

Community Busters

We all want to get along, but we don't always succeed in doing so. While the number of potential cultural obstacles to community building is not finite, there are some general, recurring issues that can be anticipated.

a. Students arriving for an extended stay in a new country experience various stages of culture shock, no matter how similar they find the new culture to their own, and no matter how fascinated they are with the new culture. For many the response is a tendency to stick together according to language or culture group, especially when they first arrive in the U.S. and feel vulnerable or insecure. While it is natural to seek out what is familiar and comfortable, if students fossilize within one social formation, they will miss many opportunities to interact with others outside their base group. The problem is compounded in schools located in heavy urban areas of the United States, where theft and personal safety can be issues that students must take

into account for the first time. Sometimes the students are victims of crime, but even non-victims can become obsessively fearful of their environment. As a result, students may stick close to their friends or residences and avoid venturing into the wider community.

b. Even when students do begin to decompress following culture shock, there is still more frequent socializing among students of a same country, language group or continent. Once in a while I'll hear complaints that Europeans exclude Asians from their social activities, as though Europeans are the in-group to aspire to. Sometimes a European student tries to transfer out of a class heavily populated by Asian students in class, the complaint being that the European doesn't feel that there are enough partners in class who are willing to converse freely in English. At other times students will seek a transfer because they feel there are too many students from their own country in the class.

c. Whether conscious or unconscious, teachers' attitudes toward their students based on culture can have a significant impact on classroom atmosphere. A teacher who neglects to check a European or Latin American student's disproportionate spoken contribution to the class vis-à-vis Asian students, for example, may do so out of inexperience with mixed nationality classes or out of insecurity in their role as instructor, or she or he may simply be more familiar with, say, the languages and cultures of Europe than with those of Asia. Conversely, instructors whose experience teaching abroad is limited to Asia may feel comfortable with Asian cultural behaviors and at odds with the attitudes of outspoken European students.

d. Perhaps the most intractable issue concerns student attitudes toward particular culture groups they perceive as negatively different or inferior, whether from nationalism, ethnocentrism, or religious hegemony. These types of attitudes can cause bad feelings among students who feel slighted or rejected as a result. Ironically, this is the case despite the fact that,

in their home countries, virtually all of the students at the school enjoy a relatively high degree of affluence and social prestige. The stratification can pit one culture against another, or it can pit a cultural collective against a scapegoat culture that then suffers alienation from the rest of the student body.

e. Affluent students expect to be treated like affluent students, and they may project an attitude toward school personnel that the latter are their servants in much the same way that waiters, bellhops, and taxi drivers are viewed as servants. This attitude can be the source of friction if school personnel decline to be treated as subservient. It can also create tension among students, for a segment is uncomfortable in the presence of this type of behavior.

f. An issue that occurs outside the classroom, but whose effects can permeate a class, has to do, ironically, with students spending too much time together. My school has its own dormitory, and due, to its remote setting, there is a tradition of students hosting parties in the dorms on weekends. Alcohol is permitted (for those of drinking age only, of course). Excessive use of alcohol among some students can lead to personal conflicts that usually have a basis in cultural differences. For example, one Monday some months ago I heard a rumor that a male student from the Middle East had threatened violence toward a European female student over the previous weekend because the young woman had told his friend, another student from the Middle East, to stop smoking indoors during a party. On the surface the conflict appeared to be a personality clash, but the root issue may well have been the sharp differences of acceptable gendered behavior as determined by the students' respective cultures.

g. Both in the classroom and out, European students tend to speak in public more than Asian students do. Partly this is driven by cultural norms of extroverted vs. introverted behavior, and partly by degree of comfort with U.S. culture. For, despite the fact that the U.S. is a diverse,

plural nation, the dominant historical cultural paradigm remains European. The influence of North American culture on Europe also has a long history. For many Asian students, moreover, their socio-educational conditioning restricts their ability to feel comfortable speaking up in class, especially during the initial phase of their studies.

h. There is also the linguistic advantage that a typical European student has over a speaker whose native language is non-Indo-European: The European can draw on a larger store of cognates and lexical borrowings from English, as well as on historically related grammatical structures. Upon arrival in the U.S., the average European student places into a more advanced class level than the average Asian student, due to the linguistic and cultural influences already mentioned as well as differences in the extent of instruction and other exposure to English the students have received in the years before their departure for the U.S. The net effect is that a significant majority the advanced students are European, and advanced students tend dominate the school power structures such as student council and yearbook.

Community-builders

Challenges, of course, present opportunities. So what can be done to foster community building among international students?

a. A big builder of global community in any ESL/EFL school is the simple fact that there is a lingua franca, English. Whether they like it or not, the great majority of our students accept English as the dominant political and economic language on the world scene. Because English is the means by which they must communicate with students who don't share their native language as well as with school staff and the wider environment, students have an immediate motivation to learn English along with whatever long-term purpose actually brought them to the school. Because the students spend a lot of social time together, they get to use what they've learned in

school the moment they walk out of the classroom. The fact that they are all at the school to make progress in their English language skills provides them with immediate common ground.

b. Because most of the students are single young adults, they are in a relatively carefree phase of life, one which is characterized by a high degree of interest in others of their age group. This condition further contributes toward their general output of good will. Many friendships blossom. Some are short term, and some endure long after students return home. Some are within a same culture group, while others reach across a great cultural divide. Not infrequently, romances bud; occasionally these relationships are cross-continental.

c. Time is also an important factor in building community. The longer the students know each other, the more deeply rooted their friendships become. This is especially important for the growth for cross-continental relationships. Asian students in particular seem to benefit from adequate time to get comfortable enough with the general social environment to assimilate fully into the international mix, but having plenty of time to get acquainted (up to nine months, at my school) works for any student who is shy by personality or feels less centered in the group due to age differences or other factors.

Despite the wisdom of not interfering too much in the lives of students, there are specific actions that teachers and administrators can take to build cultural bridges both in and out of the classroom:

d. Teachers or staff may lead or participate in activities with students outside of school, which builds solidarity among the students while at the same time creating a bridge to American culture.

e. We can iterate and reiterate that students respect not only teachers and staff, but fellow students as well. Maintaining a diplomatic demeanor in class is a key behavior for teachers.

f. We can insist that only English be used in school, not only in the classroom, but also in corridors, lounges, offices, and the dining hall. It is appropriate to expect use of the common language in any shared space.

g. We can be balanced and nonjudgmental in our attitudes towards other nationals, showing no preference for a particular group according to our own background experiences or penchants. This of course may be easier said than done, and American teachers may have strong views on such issues as gender equality or economic justice, taking positions which stand in sharp contrast to those of students from more traditional cultures. But by maintaining variety in the backgrounds and experiences of the teaching staff, we have an opportunity to at least reduce the degree of potential for bias in the school overall.

h. Continuing education in sociolinguistics and cross-cultural communication for teachers can go a long way toward promoting an atmosphere of tolerant understanding. Although it can be difficult for staff to find shared time, weekly discussions of texts about the specific languages and cultures of the students in the school or monthly workshops on sociocultural and linguistic classroom issues can be highly beneficial. Gaining awareness of cultural patterns different from our own can happen more quickly when we combine firsthand experience with study.

i. In the classroom, we can make wise use of pair and group work, whole-class exercises, and class presentations. This is done by balancing who works with whom, being careful to put students from different language backgrounds together. But it's also acceptable on occasion to pair students from the same country together, in order to give reticent students the opportunity to work with a partner without intimidation. The point is to offer a variety of configurations and to avoid getting stuck in one pattern.

j. We can be sure to cover a variety of skills in each lesson, from structured grammar practice to unstructured conversations, so that all students will have opportunities to shine each day, no matter what their educational backgrounds may have prepared them for with respect to study in the U.S.

k. We can remind ourselves regularly that teachers and students have a common purpose, which is the students' progress in English as a communicative tool. Any task or activity that is focused on student outcomes and is participatory can be a community builder. Teachers can continually work on becoming less self-conscious and more fearless in shaping each class with this purpose in mind.

l. Finally, one of the best community builders I have witnessed is the weekly school-wide lecture. Not only does it bring all of the students together into one physical space on a regular basis, it also gives them a common topic to discuss. And when the topic of the day is student culture presentations, then students become the experts. Culture presentations build English language skills while at the same time giving students a chance to relate something on a topic of great importance and familiarity to themselves.

Conclusion

Young adults from different countries who spend a lot of time together in the same school will form an international community, with or without the guidance of school personnel. The latter provide structure, however, and their presence may mean the difference between true community and degeneration into a *Lord of the Flies*-style social chaos.

There is value in maintaining a position of quiet observation and accepting the inevitability of a certain amount of culture clash, which is not necessarily unhealthy and can in fact be a significant learning experience for students. On the other hand, school personnel

encourage good will by offering good will, and teachers can use techniques such as pair and group work, culture presentations, and varied skill formats to ensure that they are reaching out to all students and avoiding potential bias.

All of these options notwithstanding, the brightest light of hope will always be the students themselves. As young adults, they are curious and friendly and enjoy a significant degree of social plasticity. Often, they are not only open to new experiences, they are actively seeking them. The role of teachers and staff in promoting good will and upholding standards is extremely important, but that importance is easily matched by the interests and motives of the international students, no matter what country they hail from.