

Building Bridges in Classrooms: Collaboration for Integration and Globalization

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Abstract. International students are missing out on an immersive campus experience because they have few meaningful interactions with American students. This article describes three class projects with different instructors across different areas of study that sought to more successfully integrate international students while building a more global mindset in American students. Both groups of students in each of the three projects expressed positive experiences and a new outlook on the possibilities for relationships between international and domestic students on campus.

Introduction

Two years ago, we attended a conference presentation that embodied what administration and Intensive English instructors at Washburn University (WU) have been seeking to do for many years: integrate our international students into university life, socially and academically. The conference presenters brought professors from different departments on their campus with whom they had collaborated across disciplines to create experiences for the international and domestic students in class. They had paired English language classes with courses that had global outcomes. This idea seemed a perfect fit for WU, which has made global and intercultural competence and diversity and inclusion priorities for the student body, many of whom come from rural areas in Kansas without much previous exposure to students from other countries. We envisioned integrating international students and increasing domestic students' global awareness through shared experiences inside the classroom. Thus, a collaboration between the Intensive English Program and various academic departments began at WU two years ago. The following is what we have implemented and some ideas on how we made it work; we have found these ideas to be adaptable and beneficial to all students involved.

Literature Review

Immersive Learning

While international student numbers have recently fallen in the United States (Redden, 2018), the benefit of immersive learning has been well researched (Fortune, 2019).

The concept of immersion in international education not only involves travel to another country to attend school but also to integrate with students from that country. If the point of travel was only for educational opportunities, then perhaps this would not be the case, but often one major consideration for international travel is to broaden personal horizons, experience cultural differences, and become global citizens of the world. Yet, international students traveling to the United States tend to segregate from their host populations. This is not a new phenomenon. In a 2012 study conducted by Stahl for Voice of America (VOA), the largest U.S. international broadcaster, some of the problem seems to stem from outreach. International students see their American counterparts as self-involved while American students watch their international counterparts remain isolated in and out of the classroom. In this survey, Stahl reported over 80% of American respondents claimed that they were interested in getting to know international students. However, a disparity exists in the two groups' perception of the effort it takes to develop relationships between American and international students. Almost half of American respondents stated that they thought it would not take extra effort to get to know international students. In comparison, only 19% of international students believed that it would not take additional effort (Stahl, 2012). While Stahl (2012) notes that both groups say, "It's the other group that's not doing enough", the survey indicates that compared to American student respondents, a higher percentage of international students seem to know that extra effort is needed to further intercultural friendships.

When we spoke to our students regarding relationships, answers followed similar trends. International students reported that they believed the American students were "stuck up" and "disinterested" in building relationships while American students reported not really thinking about the complexity of friendships at all. Therefore, we decided that intentional relationship building activities would need to be at the core of our collaboration project.

Icebreakers

Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomaš (2014) discussed the importance ice breakers serve to integrating international students into one collective body. Students in language programs are thrown together with other students of varying cultural and national backgrounds and instructors use icebreakers to facilitate integrations. Before international students leave the English language classroom and take General Education courses, an intermediary step of helping them interact with American students seems needed. Integrating within the culture, as well as being introduced to those in the more traditional space serves them by helping them acclimate to their host country.

Modules

Model 1: IE091 Language in Context Seminar | CN385 Global Communication

These two courses, Language in Context Seminar and Global Communication, had three mutual goals (See Fig. 1). The Intensive English course assignment originally included interviewing American students to find out what they thought on certain issues and writing a reflection assignment. The Global Communication students had to interview international students about certain aspects of communication and how they differ among cultures. An emphasis was placed on cultural biases, perceptions and filters.

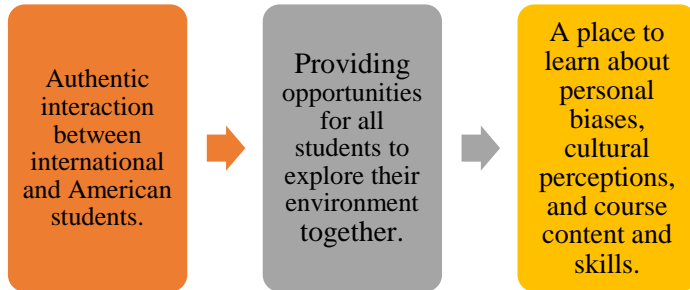


Figure 1. Goals

For this first joint instruction project, a basic sequence of activities was developed to accomplish the mutual goals (See Fig. 2). It was determined that we would need ice breakers to lower the affective filter when first gathering the two groups of students. They would need instruction to prepare them for the interview, and clear parameters and expectations for the assignments. It was also decided that change to perceptual bias could be captured by assigning reflection activities. This first iteration of the collaboration project was a success. Feedback revealed these activities built friendships and broke through previous perceptions:

- “I can make American friend by this project....understand Americans much more!” - NNS
- “...now we are close friends! ...we are very talking and we talked about many interesting things.” - NNS
- “This assignment helped change my view and allowed me ...make friends with American students...” - NNS
- “...it took those perceptual biases and helped get rid of them.” -NS
- “It was so cool to find common ground with someone I would of thought was completely different than me...” -NS
- “[] is the first person I have ever met from Japan...I always thought Japan and China were basically the same thing...how culturally unaware I am.” -NS

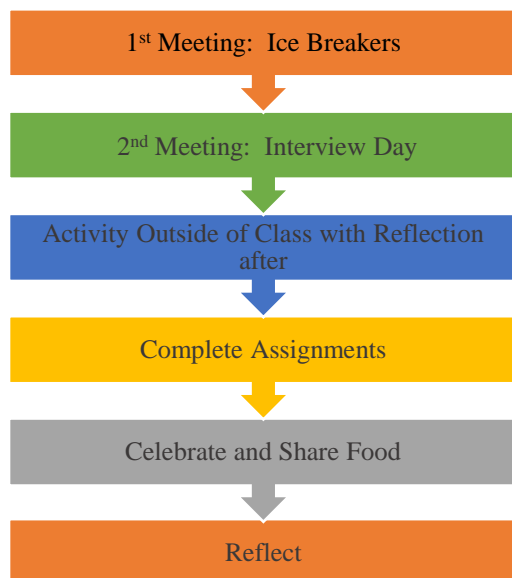


Figure 2. Class Activity Sequence

This type of joint venture program works with multiple Communication Studies units: nonverbal, intercultural, conflict, family, health, etc. While textbooks tend to focus on United States trends and practices, this ability to work with people from other cultures is essential in instilling a global mindset.

Model 2: IE204 Writing for Academic Purposes III | EN101 First Year Writing

To encourage a global mindset early in their higher education experience, students in a traditional First Year Writing class were tasked with writing a narrative based on interviews with students in Academic Purposes III, a class consisting of L2 students at the higher intermediate to low advanced level. The project followed the same sequence of class meetings and activities as shown in Figure 2.

In order to adequately prepare students ahead of time and set them up for successful interactions, students in First Year Writing read about culture and language and wrote about the significance of culture and language in their own lives. They learned about interviewing techniques and gained confidence and practical experience by interviewing an international guest as a class. Students also wrote about their expectations and anxieties heading into the joint class meetings. The most common fear expressed by First Year Writing students about the project was the possibility of difficult communication. Students worried that they would not understand or be understood by their interview partners. Knowing this concern ahead of time helped us develop and incorporate tools for successful interactions. For instance, in addition to interviewing practice, First Year Writing students composed and printed questions to leave for their L2 partners during the project's first joint class meeting. That way, if something was lost in verbal communication, L2 students had time to look things up or ask for help prior to the second joint class meeting.

Students ultimately realized that their fears were exaggerated or unfounded. They overwhelmingly reported positive interactions and a new understanding of each other's lives and cultures:

- “The icebreakers were good because everybody interact and got fun.” - NNS
- “Both of us like playing basketball so we planned to play basketball together in the gym of Washburn.” - NNS
- “It was a great experience getting to know him and ... we both got to learn a lot about each other.” - NS
- “We won all three of the games and after I was hyping him up because he was handing out buckets to the other team and they were doing a lot of talking about how they were going to win. I had a good time with [] and wouldn't mind going back with him to play again.” - NS

While students' anticipatory writing indicated an emphasis on difference and discomfort, reflections following the project revealed students' surprise and excitement about the things they found in common.

Model 3: IE203 Speaking and Understanding for Academic Purposes III | ED335 Creative Experiences in the Elementary/ Middle School Classroom

The third model emphasized cultural diversity in the classroom. It has been implemented for four semesters and is somewhat different from the other three. The Intensive English (IE) Speaking and Understanding course goals include presenting and practicing English in authentic situations while course goals for the Education (ED) Creative Experiences course include learning about cultural diversity and inclusion in the classroom. ED students learn about cultural diversity and how to integrate culture and arts into the teaching of the content areas of English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. To facilitate the introduction of cultural diversity in the classroom, the IE students were invited to present short lessons on the culture of their home country in the ED classroom. During the same time period, the ED students presented cultural arts lessons on either an American cultural art or a culture which they identified with. Presentations included visual arts (folk art/crafts), music, dance, narrative and culinary arts. After all presentations had been completed, the ED students planned a mixer celebration. The event in the fall of 2018 was hosted by the ED class and centered around a Thanksgiving cultural theme. All students were invited to share food and participate in Thanksgiving arts and crafts. The students had spent quite a bit of time together considering two presentations took place each week until all the students had finished. The impact on the students was shown in this feedback and plans are currently being made for a new semester of collaboration:

- “Know more about cultures deeply such as Thanksgiving.” - NNS
- “Listen to different kind of pronunciation” - NNS
- “Our classroom time spent with our partner English learning class and learning about the importance of recognizing other cultures, fills me with excitement on the infinite possibilities of having special cultural days directed at the culture your students identify with.” - NS

Conclusion

These collaboration projects between Intensive English and other departments on campus meet the goals of both kinds of courses. Across all projects we found that we needed at least two icebreakers in the beginning, teacher assigned groups, very clear instructions, several class meetings together, group time outside of class, reflection assignments, and celebration time with food. Even with these structured activities, these projects proved to be simpler to implement than one involving community groups off campus. There could be many different types of projects established with any course that had global awareness or diversity outcomes. We have since expanded and paired a seminar for international students with a first-year experience course, which could work on any campus. Further ideas could include participation with a departmental course in a showcase event on campus, such as poster sessions, panel discussions, and on-campus publications. Besides promoting engagement of both groups of students, these collaborations also promote interdepartmental collaboration and community engagement.

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