



## Teaching Kansas Environment and Culture in the KU Academic Accelerator Program

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*Tor-na-do* / tawrna'ydo. (pl.—does) A mobile, destructive vortex of violently rotating winds having the appearance of a funnel-shaped cloud and advancing beneath a large storm system (Oxford dictionary and thesaurus: American edition, 2007).

As Christopher Hitchens (2008) says in his seminal work, *The Secret Life of Words*, “A new word is a solution to a problem” (p. 5). This observation proved true many times in my year of directing and teaching international students in the Kansas University Academic Accelerator Program (KUAAP). In fact, that simple phrase became my touchstone and inspiration during the initial terms of the program in 2014-2015.

I was approached in the spring of 2014 by KU administration to take on the job of Academic Director of the newly minted KUAAP initiative for a twelve-month start-up period. Looking back on that event, I think my main qualifications were enthusiasm for working with first-year students, and an interest in seeing the KU student body diversified and internationalized. Prior to that, I served as Associate Director of KU's Humanities and Western Civilization Program where I regularly lectured to large classes of Western Civilization students. I also worked internationally directing KU study abroad programs, and I taught a first-year seminar where I developed a pilot version of Kansas Environment and Culture that later became a foundational course in KUAAP curriculum. But, these tasks provided little real preparation for the KUAAP challenge.

My academic field is English with concentrations in Language and Composition, among other things, but I had sparse—actually no—experience teaching English as a second language. To say that I was underprepared to meet and instruct the first group of KUAAP students, who were mostly Asian and collectively at about an intermediate or level three of English proficiency, would be a vast understatement. I was unskilled and out of my depth in this area of education, but I was fortunate to have a graduate teaching assistant who was herself an international student working in the field of linguistics. Her experience and insights proved invaluable to my understanding of students' needs, and I was intrigued by the idea of a curriculum that paired specialized language study with mainstream academic coursework in the way KUAAP proposed to do. After meeting the first cohort of 28 students in the late summer of 2014, I was more intrigued and increasingly convinced that the students' energy and excitement at being in a new place and embarking on a new venture in learning could be channeled into a productive experience. How to achieve that productivity in the classroom was, of course, another matter, and that is where words emerged as both the problem and the solution.

On the first day of class—a hot humid day in late August—my carefully prepared comments on the background of Kansas along with my carefully selected PowerPoint slides featuring maps of the state, views of the landscape, and pictures of famous Kansans went nowhere with the students. I choose my words with care, and I spoke slowly and clearly as instructed by ESL colleagues, but there was little indication that I reached my audience. I received no response to discussion prompts and no questions. I was about to pack it in and call it an early day when we were saved by a word. It was a word that flashed across the computer screen projected at the front of the room that connected to the university internet server. The word was *tornado*! It appeared as

part of a familiar warning that most Kansans know by heart, “The National Weather Service in Topeka has issued . . . .” The word tornado glared from a color strip at the top of the screen. It was impossible to ignore, and despite fledgling language skills among many of the students, the serious nature of the message hit home. One student near the front of the room raised his hand and asked, “What is a tornado?”

The warning expired almost as soon as it appeared, so, I knew we were safe in our classroom. I also knew that we were safe in another sense: a simple new word had solved our problem. It generated interest and enthusiasm over a phenomenon typical of the Kansas environment. We had something to talk about, and we spent the remainder of the hour defining and describing tornadoes and their place in the weather and culture of the state. The possibilities for discussion were suddenly endless, and we even had time to watch a short YouTube video of the infamous tornado that struck Mulvane, Kansas in 2004. The students showed signs of excitement. They asked questions about wind speed, frequency, and duration of tornadoes. There was a healthy respect for potential danger and destruction, but as the class ended, a student came up and said, “I wish we had had the tornado. I would like to see it.” I assured her that there likely would be other opportunities during her time in *Tornado Alley*.

After that first day, words became our foundation and pathway to learning about the state. We explored the name *Kansas* with its origins in the Native American word Kansa. That gave us an entrée to learning about the early people and geography of the region. We added words like prairie, nomad, and pow-wow. When we moved on to talk about Kansas in the Civil War era, we discussed abolition, free state, and the word used to describe border ruffians that later became synonymous with the University: *Jayhawk*. Like Lewis and Clark, whose journey we traced on a map, we were a *Corps of Discovery* charting new territory. The classroom was our longboat, and most of the time, just like the old explorers, we paddled upstream against the current. But, clearings in the wilderness appeared on a daily basis in the form of new words: words that challenged, prompted, or answered questions and solved problems. We moved through the landscape of our curriculum and learned much about culture, environment, and ourselves.

At the end of the term, the students advanced with the “baggage” of their coursework in tow. Hopefully, they were well-packed for the journey ahead of them through other classes and academic experiences. As for me, I look forward to retracing my steps through Kansas Environment and Culture in new terms with new “corps.” Now, I know the way; I have marked the milestones, and I am confident that we will add new ones each time we make the journey—one word at a time.

### References

- Hitchings, C. (2008). *The secret life of words: How English became English*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Oxford dictionary and thesaurus: American edition*. (2007). New York: Oxford UP.

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