

The Good, the Bad, the Hesitant, and the Indifferent: Lessons Learned from Sponsoring Cross-Cultural Partnerships with International and Domestic Students

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In 2016-2017, over 325,000 Americans studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2018). At the same time, approximately over one million international students (5.3% of the enrollment) studied at American higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2018), contributing \$36.9 billion to and supporting 450,000 jobs in the US economy (NAFSA, 2018). In a globalizing world, helping student to understand the interconnectedness of different peoples is imperative (Beerkens, 2003). The world has shrunk so that domestic and international college students are sitting next to each other in class. Some would love to communicate (the “good”), some resist it (the “bad”), some are shy (the “hesitant”), and some could care less (the “indifferent”). Even if they want to communicate, however, they do not necessarily know how - so they are left failing to understand their similarities and differences of their world-yet-elbow neighbors.

For nine years, Miami University has been sponsoring iterations of a project called Crossing Borders (Wickline, 2012a), which aims to increase students’ intercultural competence through small-group and large-group interactions. In Crossing Borders, our English Language Center (Regional campuses) and American Culture and English Program (Oxford campus) partner with psychology professors so that American and International students are interacting in a series of semi-structured social events and intercultural dialogues for educational credit. In this article, we will discuss logistics, benefits, and challenges of involving International and domestic students in such experiences. This brief, how-to summary will provide some helpful framework, history, and suggestions for creating more effective and impactful cross-cultural dialogues and programs at your institution with students who vary in their willingness to participate (good, bad, hesitant, indifferent, etc.).

Why Dialogues Matter

If students are entering a global arena and going to navigate in intercultural contexts, then developing intercultural competence is key. Do they have an open attitude toward and empathy for culturally different others, combined with the skill to interact effectively and appropriately, and an awareness of their own and others’ cultures (Deardorff, 2006)? Young Caucasian Americans, who make up the majority of American college students, often have difficulty describing their cultural (Gloria, Rieckmann, & Rush, 2000), racial (Helms, 1993; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), and ethnic (e.g., Phinney, 1989) identities. We also, from experience, find this true of many of our International students.

What We Do

Employing Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which suggests that intergroup contact helps people reduce prejudice and stereotypes, we cultivate intercultural competence through a series of 3-5 shared cultural experiences, activities, and dialogues between International and domestic (American) students across the course of a semester. These experiences have taken many forms over the years, including conversation partners, small group dialogues (3-5 students), and large group events 40-60 students). We have tried a large variety of large group experiences to include team-building exercises, icebreaker games, hayrides and festivals, stage shows, potluck meals, and dinner outings (e.g., Downey, Marcus, & Wickline, 2013). For individual pairings and small group activities, students have been able to choose their location either on- or off-campus, for example, basketball games, student organization activities, the rodeo, go-karting, bowling, trick-or-treating, dinners, and viewing Christmas light displays. Regardless of the format, students are provided suggested discussion questions and prompts. At times, we have tried required, guided discussions; other times we have made the discussion prompts available but optional, which tends to

decrease students' nervousness. After each experience, students reflect (for course credit) upon said experiences among a variety of formats including reflective journaling, brief essays, Powerpoint presentations, and other oral presentations.

Benefits for Students

Taken together, both qualitatively and quantitatively, domestic students (Wickline, Wiese, Shea, & Tassoni, 2015; Wickline, 2012a; 2012b) and international students (Downey et al., 2012; Wickline et al., 2018) indicate increases in their knowledge, skills, and awareness - as well as high satisfaction - from their Crossing Borders experiences. Two primary themes that students very often describe in their narratives are: 1) reduction of apprehension (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997), which is important for learning (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) and often begins to happen with their third meeting, and 2) expanded comfort zones. Making students interact for credit, with some oversight, seems to utilize the Zone of Proximal Development, or achieving success on a task through scaffolding and support, which also increases learning (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011). While students tend to prefer large groups to small groups and suggest large groups as more impactful by the measures we used, both strategies are effective for student growth (Wickline et al., 2018). Based on qualitative feedback from students, we gather that large groups may be more focused, strategic, and organized than independent pairs or small groups; may increase accountability and time on-task by students (fewer absences); and may help reduce anxiety (especially for International students). Anecdotally, small groups seem to foster more "organic" and in-depth relationships for students that continue when the semester ends through interactions on Facebook, WeChat, and in person. Small groups also appear to afford students more options to practice responsibility, organization and leadership skills, team communication, and flexibility. On the administrative side, small group coordination requires less demand on course instructors' time and resources, while large group interactions provide more consistency and control.

Challenges

Over almost a decade, the vast majority of students who have completed the Crossing Borders program have indicated that it is worthwhile. Although program facilitators work to make Crossing Borders equally impactful for all students, there is no doubt that the attitude and willingness students bring to the table affects their learning outcomes. When students come in excited or open about the opportunity to meet with peers from different countries, tremendous room for growth is possible. When they are nervous, hesitant, or indifferent - or they see the program as extra "busy work" that impedes their time - our work is harder. Across formats, students have noted difficulties with shyness, disengaged peers, language barriers, and awkward pauses (Wickline et al, 2018). Some challenges vary by program format (Wickline, 2012b). In small groups, students have noted that: difficulties exist working out scheduling logistics (i.e., meeting times, locations, and what groups will do during their meetings), Americans tend to do most of the talking, partners do not always respond effectively to meeting schedule requests, and people are more likely to no-show or be distracted by cell phones when teachers are not present. In large groups, Americans and International students (respectively) tend to cluster together apart from one another, spend less time in meaningful conversation, and hover on more surface "small talk" rather than more personal or deeper cultural topics.

Dos and Taboos

Drawing upon our decade of implementation, we have several "Dos and Taboos" to suggest to those who want to try shared cultural experiences with their students. First, given that the American students often benefit as much or more than the international students (Wickline et al., 2018), the program seems to work best when framed as *mutually beneficial* to both groups, rather than a "buddy," "mentor," or "conversation partner" program. When framed in "value-adding" to the students' resumes - meaning a competitive advantage in the job search - students receive the opportunity of the experience much more positively. Second, *require accountability*: Students are much less likely to slack off in the project when both groups have some kind of written or speaking assignment after each event. Thus, integrating

assignments throughout the experience increases participation. Moreover, setting up proper communication channels through campus email addresses with the instructors copied on correspondence is an excellent way to hold all parties accountable (although they may also choose to use Facebook, WeChat, or texting). Third, **model appropriate behavior** for them. Admit that you remember why it is normal to be nervous with new things - and then do new things anyway. Help, at the first meeting, for groups to merge rather than stay diverge. Practice saying International students' names with unfamiliar phonemes, and let them see you working through embarrassment when you make mistakes, but try again. Having the International students teach the American students how to count or to say five simple greetings in their native language is an effective take away and breaks down language barriers in a non-threatening format. Fourth, **shared cultural activities** are an effective way to build comradery among domestic and international students. A few examples include calligraphy writing, mastering chopsticks, team-building exercises, collaborative games, and cursive writing. Fifth, **require multiple meetings**. Students' narratives suggest that their nervousness dissipates beginning with the third group meeting. Lastly, food is good social capital, so good programs are made greater with even a little bit of funding. As such, consider **creative funding alternatives**: Could your Office of International Education help? How about your Dean's Office? Campus student organizations? Small grants from your department or Center for Teaching and Learning? Reaching out to local restaurants serving international cuisine for donations (food samples, eating instruments, decorations) is also effective, especially when the donating restaurants receive mentions on social media and news outlets.

In regards to taboos, we also offer several helpful suggestions. First, do not expect them to be experts in cross-cultural dialogue in a few hours. If possible, have International students role-play in their intensive English program classes to build confidence and fluency before meeting with their American counterparts. These meetings will often foster **baby steps to bigger comfort zones and a more global future**, not moments that immediately change their worldviews. In some cases, however, long-term friendships, travel opportunities, study abroad, and changing academic majors DO occasionally happen after Crossing Borders. Second, expressly and repeatedly **restrict cell phone use** during meetings, unless they are specifically using them as translators, sources of information (pictures to communicate), or ways to connect (sharing cell phone numbers to stay in touch). Integrating assignments using video reflections or interviews on cell phones is a comprising option. Third, **consider safety**, worse-case scenarios, and liability. Require students to have meetings in public places with minimal risk, not at their homes, for their assigned meetings - they can always opt to do more (or more varied) meetings later, on their own time: Roller coasters, Super Bowl parties, and backyard bonfires can wait. We have rules that students must meet with three or more people for each activity. Keep in mind the cultural acceptance level of marginalized groups and gender-related interpersonal interaction norms in other countries. Activities in the Intensive English Program (IEP) classroom assist in mitigating potential conflicts. Consider that if you have high school students taking college classes, your institution may require permission slips or parent notification for off-campus events. Allowing or encouraging carpooling could put both students and the university at risk, so will you provide transportation, or allow/require all students to drive themselves to off-campus events?

Conclusion

For most students, shared cultural experiences and intercultural dialogues between international and domestic students can be an extremely rich and meaningful source of deep learning (Krathwohl, 2002) if done with thought, care, and preparation. The authors would love to hear from you. We would be happy to share ideas, resources, and scoring rubrics if you are looking to start a Crossing Borders program of your own!

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