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Building Cultural and Educational Understandings through Class-to-Class Exchanges

Abstract

As part of a 10-week virtual teacher exchange program, participants organized synchronous or asynchronous classroom-to-classroom exchanges so that their English students could meet and learn from peers in other countries. Students exchanged perspectives on culture and materials on business and entrepreneurship, using English materials, videos, apps, and live meetings. This article elaborates on these experiences.

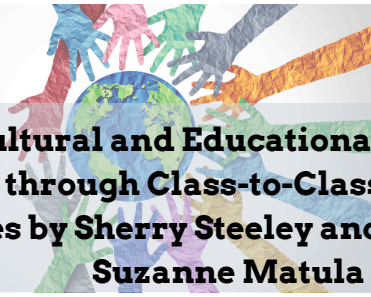
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International Classroom Exchange, Teachers

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Building Cultural and Educational Understandings through Class-to-Class Exchanges by Sherry Steeley and Suzanne Matula

Introduction

This article describes virtual class-to-class exchanges that took place within a larger virtual teacher exchange program. In this program, 40 in-service English language teachers from 30 countries around the world participated in a 10-week virtual exchange program which included synchronous and asynchronous sessions and activities each week.

The goals of the program were multifold. The primary goal was for participants to develop greater cross-cultural and international understanding through exchange, for the teachers to find commonalities with those in different linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts, and also to share challenges and solutions. Through guest lectures and facilitated discussions, the program also introduced participants to best practices in Content Based Instruction (CBI) and Project Based Learning (PBL). The program's content focus was on Business and Entrepreneurship, to prepare teachers to provide real world preparation for their own students. The capstone of this program was a PBL lesson or unit plan focused on an aspect of business and entrepreneurship (marketing, budgeting, project planning, etc) to be used with their own students in their own educational environment.

¹ The program, "English Access Microscholarship Virtual Exchange: Business and Entrepreneurship in the English Language Classroom" was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Office of English Language Programs through the English Access Microscholarship Program (Access). The program was administered by FHI 360 and delivered by Georgetown University.

One of the tools to support these goals were the class-to-class exchanges. For these exchanges, teachers were paired, or put in small groups; each pair/group included different languages and cultures, but were in similar time zones to enable the possibility of real-time (synchronous) communication, both between the participating teachers and their respective students.

Class-to-Class Exchanges

Preparation

To support participants as they began preparing for class-to-class exchanges, we provided prompts and space for pair meetings starting three weeks in advance of their first exchange. The scaffolded prompts moved from modality and technology to topics and instructional approaches. We also conveyed that, although the exchanges were intended for a given two weeks during the program, they could start earlier and extend later into the program. We also suggested structures to fit various circumstances based on class schedules, connectivity, and other issues. The first would be live synchronous sessions between two classes via Zoom or another platform. Another that might be slightly more manageable was that one teacher would visit the other's class and lead a discussion or lesson and then reverse roles in a subsequent exchange. Teachers might also choose completely asynchronous exchanges among students, with materials for response by the other class for recorded or written responses.

Focus of Exchanges

The types of lessons and exchanges that participants developed mirrored the goals of the program. Some focused on cultural exchanges and others focused on Business and Entrepreneurship topics.

Culture

One synchronous example involving culture

involved a pair representing Egypt and Pakistan. Students came up with questions for their partner class based on a KWL /3-2-1 model, shared on a Padlet for the other class. Questions ranged from culture to history to demographics, education, tourism, and music. Students in the other class selected from these topics to present in a follow-up session.

Another exchange focusing on culture was a three-way exchange conducted asynchronously among Bolivia, Japan, and Venezuela. In each class, students created videos, which was a new experience for them. The videos introduced cultural traditions and then the teacher shared the videos with partner classes. Teachers reported high levels of engagement as students experienced ideas and practices from another country, and discovered both similarities and differences.

Business and Entrepreneurship

Related to business and entrepreneurship, one pair from Turkey and India conducted an asynchronous exchange. Students developed advertising and marketing videos of their traditional local products and exchanged the videos with their partner class. Students in the receiving class had to decide whether to invest.

Another group focusing on business and entrepreneurship involved a teacher and one student visiting the partner class via Zoom to keep the exchange manageable. Each class prepared a business plan and a budget, one for gift exchanges and traditional ceremonies and the other for daily expenses. They also prepared marketing clips for their national products.

Challenges and Solutions

There were challenges in planning and implementing the class-to-class exchanges, but the teachers creatively collaborated to find

solutions. Differences in time zones created difficulty having live sessions for the two classes. Reliable internet, variable connectivity speeds, and availability of electricity were also challenges, especially for teachers participating in the program during their local rainy season. Academic schedules also created challenges: some schools were in the middle of exams and others were on break. These challenges were mitigated by holding asynchronous sessions (sharing recordings and creating material with the other class/students), and utilizing voluntary student participation (for activities held outside regularly scheduled classes).



Ongoing Impact

The inclusion of the class-to-class exchange has had a positive post-program impact on the participating teachers, arguably a larger impact than the virtual exchange program alone (i.e. without the class-to-class exchanges). Ongoing collaboration, communication, and sharing among the teachers has been high, especially between/among teachers who were paired/grouped together for the exchanges. Teachers have included experiences with (and benefits from) the class exchanges in professional development workshops and activities they have led in their own schools and local settings. The value of the exchanges has also been shared in regional TESOL Conference presentations. The exchanges have also had a longer term impact on the students involved; some student-student connections resulting from the exchanges have been maintained, fostering greater cross-cultural and international understanding between and among the students.

Implications and Conclusions

The inclusion of the class-to-class exchanges greatly enhanced the teachers' experience in the program; it provided an opportunity to more deeply connect with other teachers, and implement the ideas covered in the program (CBI, PBL, and business and entrepreneurship content topics) with their own students and with classes in a different linguistic, cultural, and geographic region. The exchanges greatly contributed to the programmatic goal of strengthening cross-cultural and international understanding while providing practical opportunities for teachers to practice and develop best practices in language teaching while providing real-life preparation for their students. While challenges in implementing virtual class-to-class exchanges are real, the benefits to teachers and students outweigh the obstacles.

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