

Building Partnerships on Campus for Cross Cultural Awareness: Piloting the AB Program

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Abstract

Given the growing need for cultural awareness and social justice in today's globalized world, at Northwest Missouri State University (Northwest) the Intensive English Program (IEP) partners English as a Second Language (ESL) students with students in other university classes (Intercultural Communication and Multiculturalism in Education) to encourage cross-cultural interaction and Intercultural Competence (ICC) among students. These programs provide ESL students opportunities to meet people and acclimate to campus culture while providing university students with experiences in diversity, equity, and inclusion. This article explains the importance of building ICC across campus. It presents an overview of the ongoing programs at Northwest, the theory behind practices, and how campus-wide partnerships help develop ICC. The evolution, implementation, and procedure of the Activity Buddy program is introduced as well as the desired outcomes of the program. The article also cites feedback from students who participated in the AB program.

The world is different today- it is much smaller. Teachers and professors must contemplate the world and how it impacts the content and process of educating university students. Colleges are increasingly tasked to prepare students for a world that has become much smaller and diverse at the same time. How can universities provide students with knowledge and

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experience that can help them develop intercultural competencies to participate in such a multicultural society – especially when students come to the university with little to no experience with diversity (Konstantopoulos, 2017)? These questions are challenging Northwest Missouri State University (Northwest) to address strategic initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Northwest is located in Maryville, MO and has a population of nearly 12,000 that is 92% white (2010 Census). It has become imperative for the university to find ways to build Intercultural Competence (ICC) amongst its students in order to prepare them to work and live in a globalized society.

Northwest has adopted many strategic initiatives and its third strategic objective calls for enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. One of the principle values in its mission statement is enhancing intercultural competencies (ICC) amongst its student population. (Northwest, 2017). Thus, the whole community is looking for methods to engage students in ways that open minds to diversity and increase tolerance and acceptance. Recognizing the near homogeneous demographic and how imperative it is to provide intercultural encounters that are both challenging and beneficial, Northwest students are encouraged to analyze their experiences and apply intercultural concepts. Intercultural competence unfortunately does not “just happen” for most; instead, it must be intentionally addressed (Deardoff, 2006, p. 245). Intentionally addressing intercultural competence development at the post-secondary level through programs, orientations, experiences, and courses – for both our domestic and international students – is an essential part of graduating global-ready students.

International experience for students on campus provides gains in global perspective and expansion of personal growth and new interpersonal relationships. Introduced in Angene Wilson’s model on the impact of international experiences mainly through conversation partners,

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Northwest's initiative focused on activities that met more than the substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding outlined in the model. (Figure 1)

Travel experience increases substantive knowledge which includes knowledge of other cultures and a general awareness of world issues, global dynamics, and human choices. Substantive knowledge, however, is but one of the four dimensions of the Wilson model necessary to increase someone's ICC (Wilson, 1993). Northwest sought to expand on the model by setting up programs to emphasize personal growth and interpersonal connections. In other words, these activities would lead to impact beyond the classroom and cultivate new relationships for both university students and their international partners.

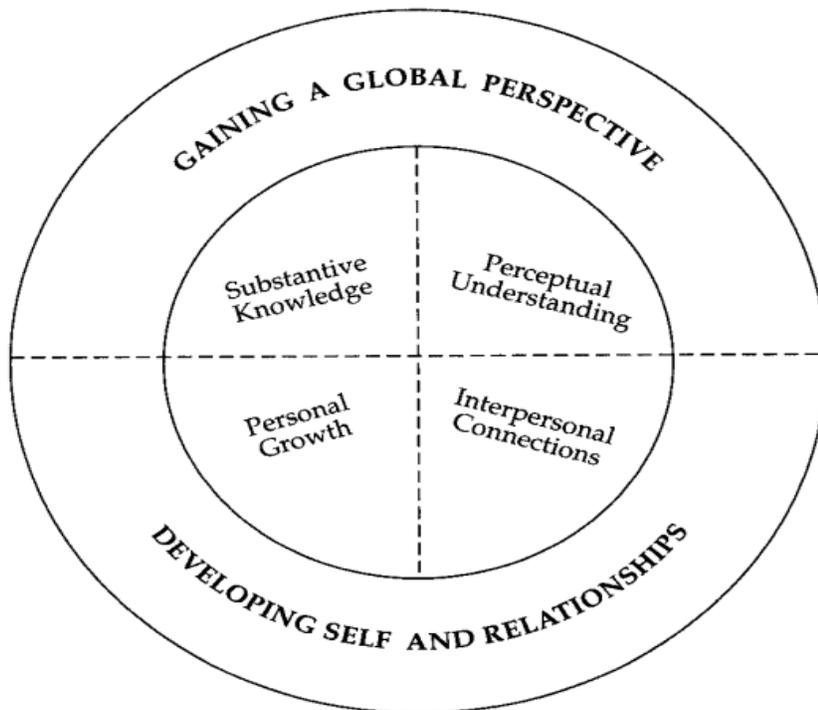


Figure 1. The impact of an international experience.

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Northwest hosts several international students. Therefore, although international students may have experiences in traveling (thus, substantive knowledge), they may not be ready for the culture shock that awaits them in their new home. These international students need opportunities to access the other three dimensions of the Wilson model. These students need to be given opportunities to build their own set of ICC while, at the same time, learning to adapt to American campus culture thus allowing them to experience personal growth and build meaningful relationships with others so different than themselves. According to Wilson, personal growth can be observed in acceptance of self and others, general maturity, acceptance of responsibility, and especially independence (Wilson 1993).

From day one, the Northwest Intensive English Program (IEP) tries to help its students make connections on campus. International students' assimilation to campus life is much more difficult than the average freshman leaving home for the first time to seek an education. English as a Second Language (ESL) students not only leave their home, but they also leave their country. Moreover, they do not speak the language well-enough or have anyone close to turn to. They are completely out of their element (Konstantopoulos, 2017). It is the IEP's responsibility to support these international students and give them an appropriate introduction to life on campus. For these reasons, the IEP tries to incorporate a variety of prepared activities to help students acclimate to life on campus.

Methods to Help ESL Students Adjust to Campus Life

Campus Tours

New international students participate in campus tours to familiarize them with the campus and what is available to them. At Northwest, this includes visits to the university farm,

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the performing arts center, the geoscience museum, and the campus radio and TV station. They are also given a library tour and taught how to check out books by the library staff. A large part of acclimation to the Northwest campus is knowing where resources are located and how they can benefit students.

Local Tours

It is also important for the international students to become familiar with the community to which they are now living. For this reason, the ESL program also takes its students on local tours. One destination is to the Nodaway County Historical Museum where students learn about local history. A more recent tour has been to the local high school where ESL students are paired up with high school students. The pairs go to class together and get a taste of what an American high school is like. This leads to an active cultural comparison and interaction which both the ESL and the high school students seem to enjoy.

Guest Lecturers

Besides arranging tours, guest speakers are invited to come to the IEP classrooms. The students like meeting other professors and have shown great interest in the topics that they have discussed. Lectures on non-verbal communication, criminology, and politics are some examples of topics introducing students to different aspects of American culture, issues, Northwest professors, and a variety of teaching styles. One guest lecturer the ESL students enjoyed was in the summer of 2016. Jason Offutt, Northwest mass media instructor and published author, spoke about local ghost stories and haunted houses, which the students found quite intriguing.

Class Observations

Another method for ESL students to get to know campus culture is to send them on class observations. These class observations are opportunities for listening practice, but they also give students a taste of academic classes. Through follow-up discussions, ESL students are able to reflect on what they observed and learned. One student said, “I thought all American professors had beards and wore blazers.” This led to a discussion about stereotypes of American academic culture. Another student told us that in her country of China all the professors lecture and that there are never any discussions in class. These activities help ESL students recognize the differences in academic culture they will experience during their time on campus.

These activities are designed to acclimate international students to their new surroundings and meet the substantive knowledge of the Wilson Model. However, Northwest has done much more to cultivate the other domains of the model by facilitating the building of relationships between traditional campus students and international students through structured activities.

Connecting ESL Students with Traditional Students on Campus

Efforts to facilitate university students making contact with ESL students necessitated partnerships across campus between many university departments. According to Wilson, the perceptual dimension of a global perspective includes open-mindedness, anticipation of complexity, resistance to stereotyping, inclination to empathize, and non-chauvinism, all of which Northwest faculty hope traditional and international students achieve through these opportunities to connect (Wilson 1993).

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Combining Classes

ESL students are invited to join other classes and university students visit the IEP classroom. Sometimes students are simply paired up or grouped for informal chats and have the opportunity to learn more about each other and their respective cultures. During specific times when the material studied in class can be easily discussed, students use these opportunities for interviews and surveys. For example, when ESL students were studying the influence of social media, they joined a media writing class where they interviewed the media students about social media and its impact. When Intercultural Communication students were studying marriage in other cultures, the class took this opportunity to ask the ESL students about marriage culture in their countries. When joining the Multiculturalism in Education classes, education students ask ESL students about teaching and learning styles in their native countries.

Conversation Partners

The most long-standing method used to help ESL students get to know traditional students on campus is to provide each ESL student with a conversation partner (CP). The CP program has been in place for over eleven years at Northwest. For nine of those years CPs were student employees hired each fall semester. At the end of the 2015 spring semester, the IEP became aware of the need for more diversity in the training of future teachers in the Northwest School of Education. This led the IEP to reach out and subsequently build a volunteer CP program in which education majors receive diversity hour credits (required before student teaching) by participating as CPs to the ESL students for a semester. Students meet once or twice a week for an hour and have discussions on topics of their choosing. The university has

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seen in some instances where CPs and their international partners continue their relationships beyond the semester requirement becoming friends in the process.

Impact on SOE Students

Partnering with the School of Education (SOE) benefited the SOE in their accreditation process. Like many institutions on campus, the SOE was looking for diverse opportunities for their teacher candidates. Many of these candidates come from backgrounds which limit their exposure to students from a different culture. The partnership between the IEP and the SOE was one of mutual benefit. ESL students had an opportunity to connect with traditional students in the SOE, and the SOE students received experience interacting with students from various cultures from outside the United States.

The IEP found other ways to provide both groups of students with opportunities to interact and learn from each other. Besides CPs, education majors became tutors and culture class presenters for the IEP. SOE students could also do practicum observations and have extended field experience with the ESL students. Students were also paired up in education classes to go to campus activities together. These SOE students accompanying ESL students to activities are referred to as Activity Buddies (ABs) as opposed to CPs. Wilson's research supports that cross-cultural experience has value, particularly for future teachers (1993).

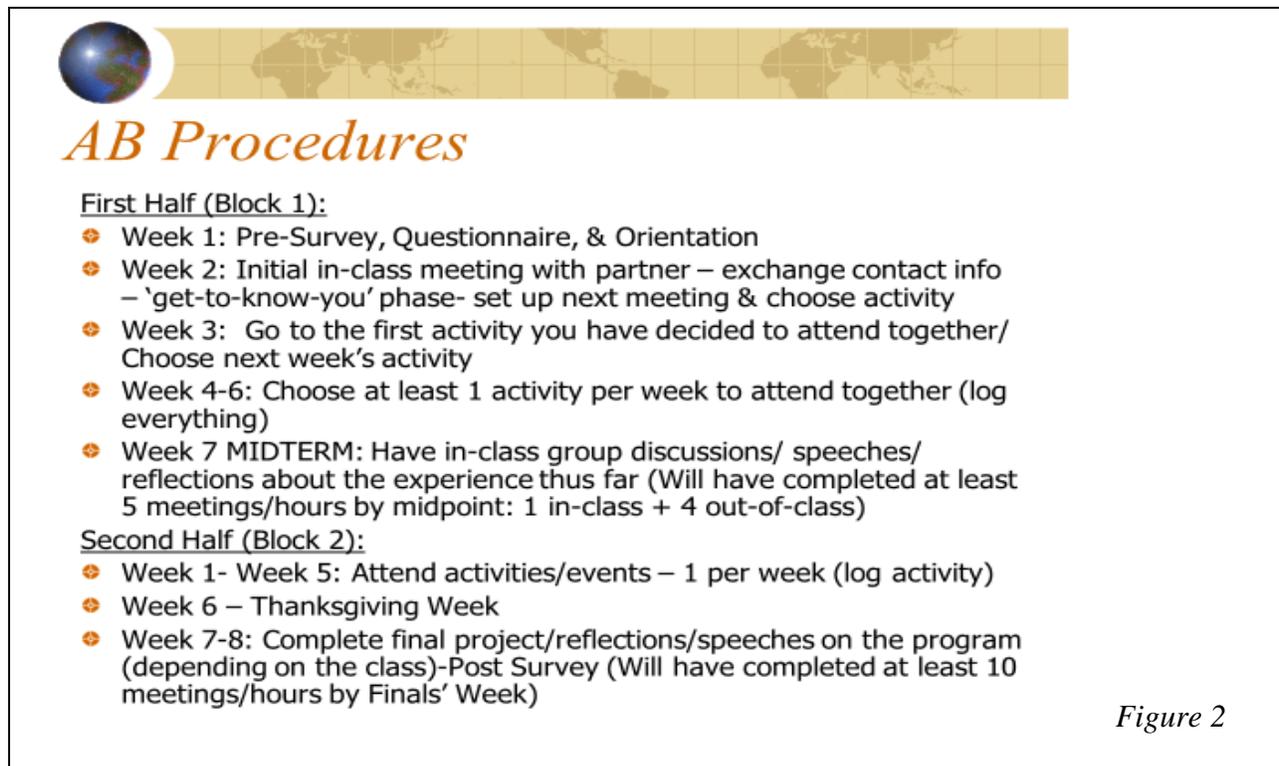
The AB Program

Out of the Northwest partnerships and the different methods provided to bring international and degree-seeking students together, the Activity Buddy (AB) program evolved. The AB program is setup to be a semester long program pairing ESL students with students taking Multiculturalism in Education in the School of Education and with students taking

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Intercultural Communication (IC) in the School of Mass Media & Communication. Both classes incorporate the AB activity into the curriculum to meet class outcomes tied to the Wilson model for personal growth, substantive understanding, perceptual understanding, and interpersonal connection. SOE students use their experiences to meet diversity competencies, similar to the Wilson model domains, preparing them for their student teaching. IC professors are working towards incorporating the AB program as a service- learning project.

Figure 2 shows the AB procedure instructors follow to set up the program.



AB Procedures

First Half (Block 1):

- ✦ Week 1: Pre-Survey, Questionnaire, & Orientation
- ✦ Week 2: Initial in-class meeting with partner – exchange contact info – ‘get-to-know-you’ phase- set up next meeting & choose activity
- ✦ Week 3: Go to the first activity you have decided to attend together/ Choose next week’s activity
- ✦ Week 4-6: Choose at least 1 activity per week to attend together (log everything)
- ✦ Week 7 MIDTERM: Have in-class group discussions/ speeches/ reflections about the experience thus far (Will have completed at least 5 meetings/hours by midpoint: 1 in-class + 4 out-of-class)

Second Half (Block 2):

- ✦ Week 1- Week 5: Attend activities/events – 1 per week (log activity)
- ✦ Week 6 – Thanksgiving Week
- ✦ Week 7-8: Complete final project/reflections/speeches on the program (depending on the class)-Post Survey (Will have completed at least 10 meetings/hours by Finals’ Week)

Figure 2

From the beginning, the SOE was challenged to create meaningful connections for its teacher candidates with diverse peers on campus. The AB program required teacher candidates who were more advanced in their program to learn more about various cultures as they developed their lesson planning skills. By interacting with ESL students on a weekly basis and

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participating in ordinary campus activities, SOE students taking Multiculturalism in Education class could see how these developing relationships facilitated the process of becoming a more culturally responsive teacher in the future. “In order to prepare their students to be citizens of a global as well as a national society, prospective teachers need to themselves become comfortable as citizens of the world” (Wilson, 1993).

SOE and IC students partnered with ESL students at athletic events, fine arts performances, late night activities at the recreation center, homecoming events, and holiday activities. Through these experiences the SOE received feedback from its teacher candidates on how these activities supported the multicultural curriculum and impacted their beliefs about teaching students from various backgrounds and cultures. The desired outcome of the AB program is four-fold: 1) to improve and develop ICC, 2) for ESL students to practice language skills and learn about campus culture, 3) for university students to gain insight into their areas of study and develop a worldview, and 4) for all participants to evolve into global citizens (Konstantopoulos, Joachim, Kiene, & Wilson, 2016). However, students taking part in the AB program learned a lot more than they had expected. Some of their quotes taken from post-surveys about what they learned or found surprising are listed in Figures 3 and 4.

Comments from ESL students about partnering with other classes
<i>“My partner told me that home schooling as a child. It was interesting. End of conversation looked for homeschooling information.”</i>
<i>“I also know the education system isn’t good enough in my culture and not good for teenagers to discover their worth of their life.”</i>
<i>“The students in America don’t need to take too many class every day.”</i>
<i>“American students start to do part-time job when they are in high school.”</i>

Figure 3

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Comments from university students
<i>“I learned that other cultures all experience different amounts of time in school.”</i>
<i>“I was surprised that other cultures felt as if school was a prison.”</i>
<i>“It made me realize just how crazy Americans are about alcohol.”</i>
<i>“Learning about another culture by directly discussing it with a member of that culture leaves a lasting impression than just reading about it.”</i>
<i>“In others eyes, we dress weird. (too free)”</i>
<i>“I learned that we focus more on activities and sports than we do on school.”</i>
<i>“The amount of time other cultures go to school shocked me.”</i>

Figure 4

The AB program reinforced an ICC development philosophy embraced by the SOE for its teacher candidates. The SOE supports the curricular objectives of Julie A. Belz Linguistic Perspectives on the Development of Intercultural Competencies, including developing in the learner (a) a willingness to seek out interaction with the other in a relationship of equality; (b) a genuine interest in the other's point of view on phenomena in one's own culture and in the other's culture; (c) a readiness to interrogate the value systems and assumptions behind one's own cultural practices; (d) a readiness to examine one's own affective reactions to the experience of otherness and to cope with these reactions; and (e) a readiness to engage with culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication (Belz, 2003). Simply, a student must partake in an investigation of their own biases (overt or hidden) to better understand themselves before embarking on the interaction with others from a culture different than their own. Students in the Multiculturalism in Education class participate in a self-survey of their diversity competencies before participating in the AB program and then self-reflect with the same survey after the experience. This provides the SOE with data that tracks the students ICC development, which

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the SOE shares with its accrediting body. As a result of the AB experience, teacher candidates should be better equipped to work with diverse students during their student teaching experience.

Lessons Learned

Although the activities were meant to fulfill Wilson's model and help Northwest achieve Strategic Objective 3, there were some challenges faced. In trying to partner students, the biggest issue was time management. Although many of the international students seemed to have more time and were readily available to meet with their various partners, the American students worked part-time jobs concurrently to taking class. Therefore, there were many conflicts with finding a time to meet. Another issue was the desire to make meetings. Some students felt forced into meeting. Students today have a more difficult time with face to face interactions and requiring them to meet created some anxiety. Giving them choices for the activities gave the students some autonomy, which helped. However, having a set of required activities facilitated when students had a difficult time finding activities to attend. Others replicating this program would have to experiment to find the right amount of required and elective activities. A third and final problem was misunderstanding. Both groups of students learned quickly some of the challenges to speaking different languages. Email and Facebook helped with some of the communication, but many times students did not connect due to a misunderstanding of where to meet and when. Other programs can set up systems in place to remedy miscommunication between the international students and traditional students.

In spite of the fact that these three problems would continue despite our best efforts, the program devised some ways to improve the issues. One such way was having students fill out an application form that included their time restraints as well as their interests. This helped pair up students according to likes and schedules. As for desire to meet, assigning a mandatory project

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and weekly reports that were part of their cumulative grade provided incentive for them to meet. Finally, any misunderstandings were addressed in weekly/biweekly reports, through class discussions, one-on-one meetings, or teacher interventions.

Nonetheless, it was felt that these drawbacks also provided learning opportunities and helped fulfill the goals of the program. First of all, students grew personally by learning about themselves and being able to compare their culture to their partner's. They were also able to make intercultural connections they would otherwise not have had a chance to make. Personal growth and interpersonal connections are the desired results outlined in the Wilson model. The other half of the model is gaining a global perspective through substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding. The program was designed to give a working perspective to the Wilson model. These activities at Northwest have also been recognized by the administration as an effective way to meet its third strategic objective for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when Dr. Joachim, Northwest Communications Professor, begins his IC class, he quotes something believed to be stated by Benjamin Franklin, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn” (Konstantopoulos, Joachim, Kiene, & Wilson, 2016). This is something that Northwest strives to accomplish with students. Northwest Missouri State University wants its students to be involved in their learning in a way that makes them better equipped to be successful in today's much smaller world. Intercultural competence is a necessary skill and as higher-education professionals we should train students accordingly and offer them every opportunity possible to achieve and grow towards ICC. George Santayana said, “A man's feet must be planted in his country, but his eyes should survey the world”

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(Konstantopoulos, Joachim, Kiene, & Wilson, 2016). Northwest faculty believe that in building partnerships to pair degree-seeking students and international students together, the students will be able to do just that as culturally-competent citizens of the world.

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