

Cultural exchange expience

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CULTURAL EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

The Cultural Exchange Program (2022-23) takes place between public high school students from the Bronx, New York, and private school counterparts from Puebla, Mexico. The program seeks to build confidence and increase cultural awareness through sharing autobiographical experiences. A mix of photographic and creative writing exercises formed the basis of discussions and social interactions via video conferencing. A collection of student exercises will be published as, “La Revistita” at the conclusion of the New York school year. In this document of his experience, the Teaching Artist outlines the syllabus, observes obstacles to program implementation and student engagement (which include educational and socioeconomic boundaries), and concludes with recommendations for the program’s next iteration.

Key words: After School Program, Bilingual Education, Creative Writing, Cultural Exchange, Cultural Identity, Cultural Pride, Photography, World Citizen

Cultural Exchange Experience

Background

I was approached about co-teaching the Cultural Exchange Program (“CX”) after taking staff photos at DreamYard Preparatory School. The after-school program would foster self-expression, build confidence, and increase community and cultural awareness through an exchange of autobiographical storytelling. Students involved would be from “BSB” (Bronx High School of Business), and “DYP” (DreamYard Prep), both situated in the Taft Educational Building of the Bronx, New York, and “Puebla” (Prepa Ibero Puebla of Puebla, Mexico).

The Program Director, Ian Gray-Stack, needed someone to incorporate a photographic component into storytelling. The program seemed appealing; in addition to being a professional photographer, I’m also a classically trained actor—one trained in story-telling within a Shakespearean, 5-part framework. Though my formally accredited education is in the Natural Sciences, over the last twenty years, I’ve successfully taught students from various educational settings, from pre-K to high school, from the arts to math and English.

Productivity

The CX Program ‘22-’23 began in November. BSB and DYP students participated serially, each participating for about ten weeks, meeting with Puebla 1-3 times per month. The students produced enough material to create “*La Revistita | The Tiny Mag for Intercambio Cultural*” (.pdf). It will include cultural signifiers, food and dance, the students’ professional aspirations, and photographic content.

With little notice, DYP students recently presented a look-back at the “After-School Arts Sharing” before peers, teachers, and administrators. They remained self-possessed while as they presented their thoughts, some extemporaneously. It was a triumph of which we all were quite proud. The following are words DYP students associated with their experience;

- *Culture*
- *Country*
- *Empathy*
- *Ambition*
- *Discipline*
- *Perseverance*

The following are “positives” DYP students associated with their experience;

- *“Listening and being listened to, sincerely”*
- *“Speak with and observe people from other countries”*
- *“Learn about Mexican Culture, the way they speak (slow and proper), and different words they use compared to us”*
- *“A safe space to practice English”*
- *“Learned how to present in English and Spanish in front of new people”*

We used an ad hoc, week-to-week syllabus. Activities were designed to appreciate cultural aspects of the community, foster cultural curiosity, dispel stereotypes, improve communication skills, and expand student concepts of career¹ possibilities. Assembling the products from the syllabus into a “magazine” became the year’s-end goal.

Syllabus

- Photographic Activities (see links)
- Discussions/Mini-Essays
 - Define of Culture
 - What Culture(s) Do You Identify With?
 - Identify Your Cultural Signifiers
 - Holiday Culture (Foods)
 - How Do You See Your Future?
- Field Trips
 - St. Barnabus Teaching Kitchen & Wellness Center. Students interested in culinary arts
 - St. Barnabus walking tour with a resident. Students interested in medical careers
 - Theater (Bob Fosse’s Dancin’)
- Cultural Exchange
 - Local & National Cultural Exchange
 - Photography Exchange

¹ See class links

- Activities Presentation
- Essay Presentation, bilingually
- Free-form/Casual Discussion, ie, exchanging accents. local slang
- Pop-Snack Project²/Food Exchange

Obstacles

The experience at times felt Sisyphean and Herculean, to borrow from mythology. Numerous logistical impediments, from classroom readiness to scheduling conflicts consistently threw off our schedule and resulted in late and noisy “Zoom” meetings with Puebla.

Logistic Impediments

- Late Start: November
- Access: Computer Room
- Access: Teaching Artist-Student communication (schools.nyc.gov email)
- Access (wifi): Personal Computer
- Training: Provide student access to computers
- Scheduling: Student Conflicts (Exams, Field Trips)

My prior teaching experience with children from academically engaged families. I’m from a family of academics. My expectations were off. The Bronx poverty rate is over 20% [2]. DYP counts 92% of its population from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and ranks number 811 of 985 New York City High Schools; the 70% graduation rate falls well below the state median. BSB carries very similar statistics [1].

Academic Impediments

- Disparate expectations
- Disparate proficiencies in English
- Disparate proficiencies in grammatical Spanish

Environment

- Dual function of After-Programs
- Low Income

² See class links

- English language proficiency

Observations

Basic Organization. Navigating through obstacles meant student engagement of 25-35 minutes of the hour. We extended the program time to two hours, incorporated the necessary social and food functions, and changed locations from the isolation of the Computer Room to the more social Art Room.

Competing Interests = Zero Sum. There were two groups of competing student interests (1) Photographic and (2) Creative Writing. Photographic instruction was not simultaneously compatible with creative writing by a single teacher. A zero-sum game ensued, resulting in the loss of good students, particularly male, all of who were interested in photography.

Bilingual Education. Our Spanish-speaking students were initially self-conscious about communicating both in English and Spanish. Some of our students may graduate without becoming fluent English speakers. A few have remarked, “I never have a chance to practice English”. Our students thought Puebla students and staff to be great listeners, and found it a safe space to communicate. They remarked about Puebla students’ self-possession as they speak English, even when they grappled for words and phrases. Presenting essays in English and Spanish to their peers gave our students invaluable exposure and practice.

Confidence. Building our first group’s student’s confidence, BSB, was quite difficult. Our students were very reluctant when working and sharing after they looked at Puebla’s pictures, that were aspirational for them. Late efforts were made to remark the significant contributions The Bronx’s collective had, but no real “link” was made. DYP experience was quite better. With smaller groups and a more suitable meeting space, they really enjoyed the experience with Puebla (take in mind that they didn’t get Puebla’s pictures nor personal circumstances). We should consider exploring the strength of the Bronx’s collective culture and the individual identity weeks before the meetings start.

Motivation. A trip to Mexico is the dream. Never promised, it has been noted as an event to work towards. Producing a magazine would provide tangible evidence of value, a first step towards securing funding. Towards that end, when tasks were shifted from homework to in-class completion, morale and productivity improved. (It’s worth noting DYP had “carrots dangled” as very modest-value gift cards. It is the hope that the camaraderie, accomplishments, and pride in their own culture found this year will become self-sustaining.

Recommendations

Goals

- International Trip within 2yrs (prior to current student graduation)
- Cultural Magazine publication
- Speech & Presentation, bilingual
- Essay Skills, bilingual
- Cultural Appreciation
- Career Exposure

Schedule

- *August/Sept.* Create Master Calendar. Coordinate participating schools' calendars
- *September.* Student Recruitment Effort
- *September.:* Teaching Artist On-Boarding
 - eMail acct : schools.nyc.gov
 - Training : Computer Lab/Classroom Monitor training
 - Restroom Key
 - Teacher-Teaching Artist Introduction & Planning Session
- *October.* Program Start (2 hr)
- *November.* Cultural Exchange Begins (1 hr, 1-2x/mo)
- *Nov Dec Jan.* Culture Collection 1/Content Creation
- *Feb Mar April.* Culture Collection 2/Content Creation
- *May-Jun.* Magazine Layout

Sessions (two hours)

- Cultural Exchange 1-2x/mo
 - Activities lead to Brief presentation & discussion
 - Presentations in English and Spanish/native language
 - Free-Form Casual Discussions
 - Use one shared screen vs. individual computers

References

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Class Links:

[Career](#), [Photography \(basics\)](#), [Photography \(food\)](#), [School in Pictures \(scale\)](#), [School in Pictures \(tour\)](#)