

## **CULTURAL INTEGRATION IN ACTION: TWO FACULTY MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES**

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In our globalized society, cultural understanding is paramount for people in businesses, families, and schools. On college campuses too often there is a divide between international students and domestic students. This is reflected in the K-12 school environment as well, especially with the influx of refugee and immigrant students. Universities, colleges, and school districts expend resources and effort to bridge this gap so that all groups may benefit from the rich diversity of perspectives. Two professors at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) have spent the past three and one-half years finding ways to successfully connect their diverse student groups. Audrey Rogers, School of Education, and Lyra Riabov, School of Arts and Sciences, Institute for Language Education (ILE), have brought their students together, conducted action research, retrieved anecdotal feedback, and solicited reflections in the development of multiple models of cultural collaboration. Their goals of encouraging student cohesion, fostering intercultural sensitivity, and acquiring language skills serve as a pedagogical framework for schools and colleges seeking innovative ways to connect their student populations. Professors Rogers and Riabov discovered their common belief in having students experience cultural exchanges as a way to achieve programmatic goals.

Situated in Manchester, New Hampshire, the largest and one of the most culturally diverse cities in New Hampshire, the School of Education at SNHU is committed to promoting cultural competence in its preservice teacher candidates. Professor Rogers' students will one day be leading their own classrooms from kindergarten through high school. Given the changing demographics in today's student population, there is a clear need for prospective teachers to have a proficient level of cultural competence (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010). Future teachers need to be culturally aware of their own values and heritage and those of others. They need to acquire knowledge on the historical and current context of minorities in the United States, as well as the backgrounds of the students they will likely have in class. Preservice candidates also need to be skilled in intercultural communication and 21<sup>st</sup> century educator practices. Research has shown that innovative ways of building this competence is needed in our nation's teacher preparation programs (Castro, 2010).

Culture Studies is an integral part of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), and the ILE's Intensive English Program (IEP) offers this course to all levels of ESL students. Being equipped with thoroughly researched curriculum guidelines and abundant resources, ILE faculty has been successfully offering this course to our students. But it was obvious that something very important was missing. Our international students came to the United States to learn English and American culture, but they did not have much opportunity to communicate with the domestic students although they stayed on the campus of an American university. Professor Tim DiMatteo, chair of the IEP program, and Professor Riabov conducted a number of surveys that suggested the need to help international students have an organized way to communicate with SNHU domestic students in a classroom environment. An inspiring resource of native speakers who could help our international students practice their English language skills and learn American culture first hand was available but not used. At the same time our domestic students

could learn about world cultures by communicating and participating in meaningful activities with ILE international students.

Thus, our Cultural Integration project started in the fall of 2007 with the first collaboration between preservice candidates and international students consisting of one session about 75-minutes long in a classroom setting. Education students had prepared interview questions. Many questions centered on the international students' educational experiences in their home countries and the transition they have faced coming to the United States. To set a welcoming tone, Professor Rogers used PowerPoint to introduce the exchange and show images from all of the countries represented in the room. As each slide appeared, students from that country stood. Student were represented from China, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, Turkey, Korea, and Saudi Arabia. For the United States' slide, education students stood and said what state they were from. The slides also set out the goals of the exchange from the perspective of the two professors. Students were clear that the overriding emphasis was on making a connection with another student different from oneself. Second to that was the exchange of ideas and cultural information. This technique of starting with a PowerPoint presentation to make clear the goals has been refined over the years, but continues to be an effective tool for setting a positive tone. The conversations were animated and many seemed reluctant to end them when groups were asked to report out. Prospective teachers took the lead for each group and spoke about how much their team learned and the new insights they gained. In their written reflections, students from both groups were very positive and the foundation was laid for our collaboration to grow.

Some common themes emerged from the reflections of education students. One is that they felt nervous at the start but that their feelings and views of the international students changed over the course of the session. Also, students held preconceived views of international students that were stereotypical and incorrect. Many students articulated the value of the exchange and were able to make the connection between the goal of the session and their future classrooms. Two representative responses are below:

*I really enjoyed being able to spend time with people who are from different countries. It really helps me gain perspective on the world. It was an eye opening experience because as Americans we don't think that life could be any other way than the way we are living. I would love to have another experience like this. It was educational and fun. The connections I made with the international students are important because now I have more perspective on the world, like I said before. This experience was important, especially for teacher candidates because the more knowledge you have, the more you can share with your students. I'm always looking for ways to expand my knowledge and this experience did it for sure. —Education Student*

*I never thought it would be so fun to sit with a person from a foreign country, that I know nothing about, and ask her questions about it. It is good for people to learn about other countries and other cultures. Especially today where our country is a melting pot of cultures it would be beneficial for people to know about other cultures and countries instead of basing our knowledge of the countries on stereotypes. Many people today see people from other countries and will judge them because of stereotypes. People of Middle-Eastern heritage are usually looked at with negative attitudes because of terrorism being based in the Middle East. If people could actually sit down with these people and talk to them they might see that these people are just like American people but with some differences in culture. We had this opportunity in our class to clear stereotypes and sit down with people and make the connections between us. —Education Student*

The international students also expressed great satisfaction with these classes. Below are some reflections representative of many students' responses:

*It was the first time I studied with American students. I was deeply impressed with the equal atmosphere between teachers and students during the class activities. Comparing with Chinese educational way, American teachers focus on developing the thinking abilities of students. During that class the teacher always gave students the opportunities to think about and discuss the topic. In my opinion, there is an active teaching ethos which enables us to cooperate with other students. Furthermore, discussing with teammates helps us to learn how to express our opinions positively. Moreover, it really helps us to better communicate with people from different cultures. This meaningful experience I have never had before. —Student from China*

*My impression of studying with American students is really marvelous. It helps me a lot to build my confidence. When we had discussion with my group, we shared our opinions and asked question each other. I have learned a different point of view on the topic I have discussed. We had a very different background in education systems. Yet, higher education in the US is still more advanced than in other underdeveloped countries. The important thing was we were able to communicate and understand each other's point of view. —Student from Indonesia*

International Students' Class – Pre Combined Class Survey Data

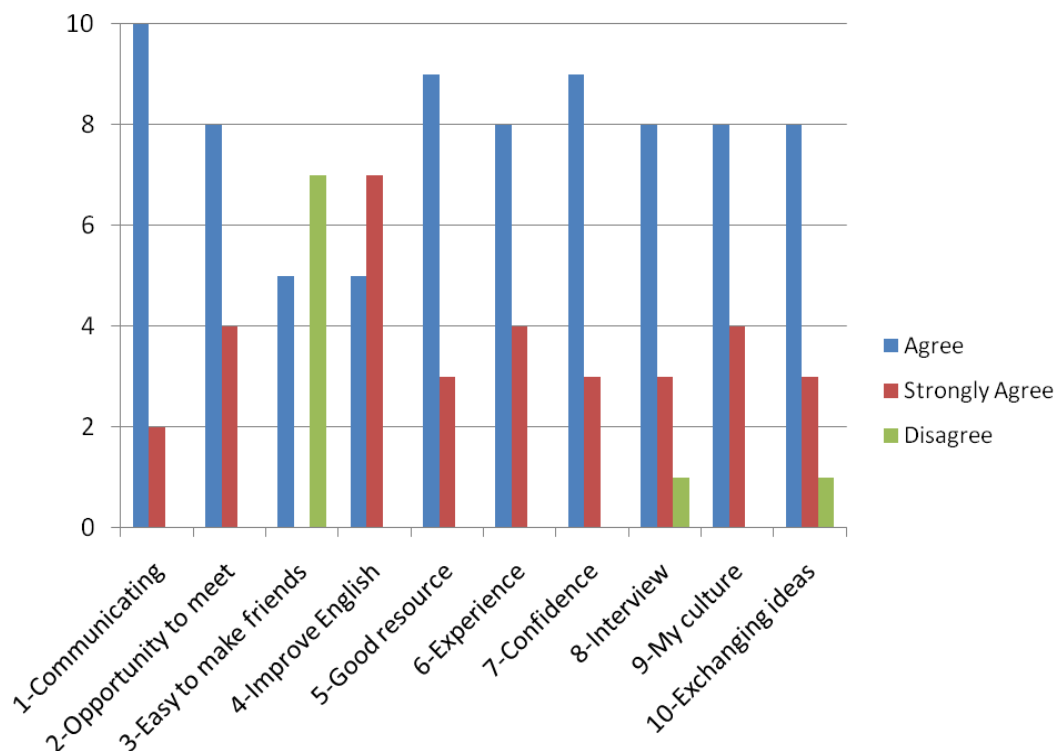


Figure 1. International students' survey results before attending combined classes with domestic students. (See Appendix B for full questionnaire)

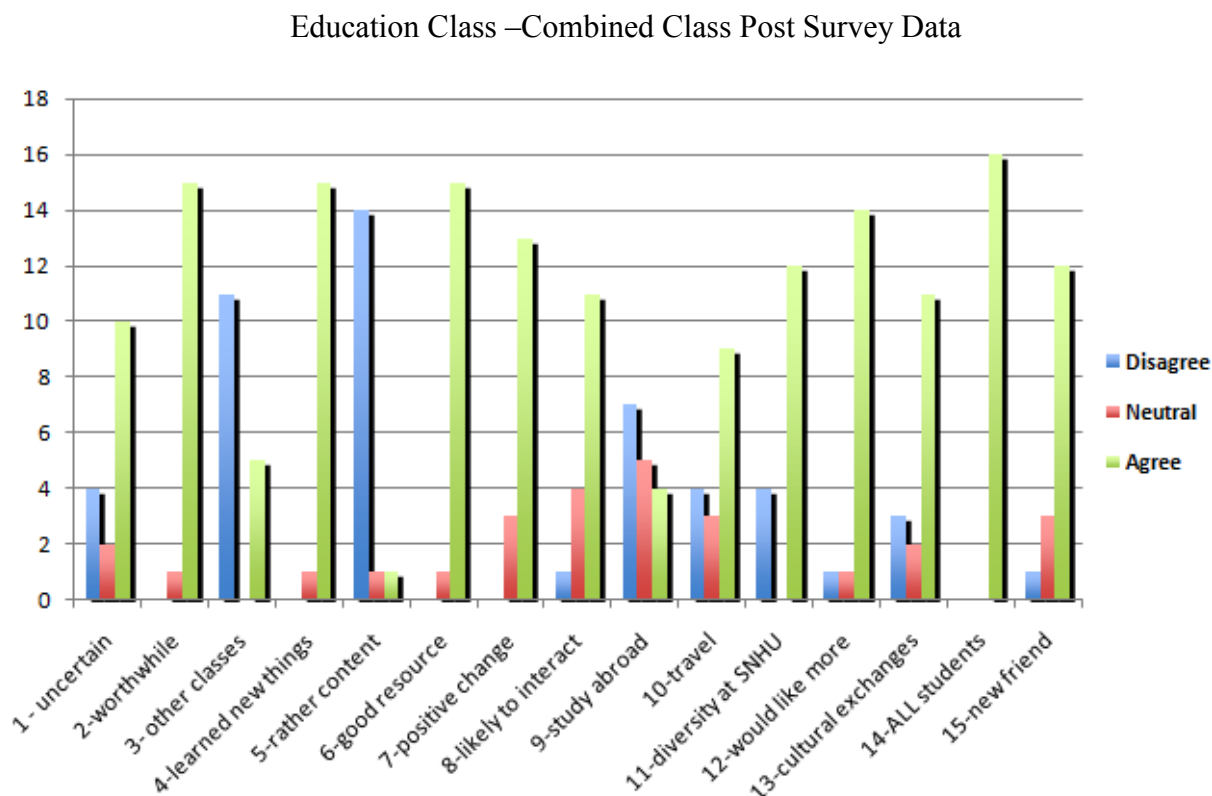


Figure 2. Education students' survey results after combining classes with international students. (See Appendix A for full questionnaire)

Most students have offered positive responses every semester after every model of one, two, or three sessions. One time, however, there was not a positive outcome. In that case, the education students were not well prepared for the interview, had not researched any countries and as a result asked naïve and perhaps insulting questions of their international partner. After this experience, we decided not to rush collaboration if there was not sufficient room in the syllabus to prepare students. Also, on occasion, international students have been dismayed at the ethnocentrism and lack of knowledge of preservice candidates; this was perhaps due to the fact that most of the teacher candidates were in their first or second year at the university. Overall, however, the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

In addition to soliciting students' reflections, professors Rogers and Riabov conducted pre- and post-surveys at various points to measure any changes in perceptions or beliefs and they administered reflection prompts to gauge students' responses and learning (see Appendix A, B, and C). The results of the survey for prospective teachers (see Fig. 2) were positive with a high frequency of students choosing *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* that it was a worthwhile exchange that they would like to experience more. Additionally, many students reported that they felt they had gained a new friend out of the session. International students' survey results before combining classes typically indicated that while they felt they had the opportunity to meet domestic students, they rarely formed friendships or used the relationships to improve their English or learn about American culture (see Fig. 1). After combining classes, the international students reported similarly positive results with an overwhelming majority *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* that "Communicating with American students helps to learn American culture."

They also agreed that combining classes with American students is a good resource to learn about American culture and it helped them to develop confidence for future college studies.

Since the first exchange, professors Rogers and Riabov designed and implemented multi-session experiences. They developed three models. In the evolution of the models, the effectiveness of using technology to facilitate the cultural collaboration became clear. The sessions, whether one time or three, became infused with technological tools that aided students from each group to get to know each other better and to focus their efforts on the goals of the exchange. The tools they have used to promote connections and conversation have been the Flip video camera, Google Earth, Audacity, iTunesU, PowerPoint and Prezi ([www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com)). Each professor also engaged students in group and individual reflective assignments. Professor Rogers' students further demonstrated their learning from the experience by constructing digital portfolio pages that became part of the larger course portfolio which included multiple reflections, pictures of the sessions, and the podcast.

The three models provide a menu of approaches from which educators could draw. Model I remains the one-session interview. Undergraduate day students and international students meet during one class period. Partners are arranged ahead of time. The goals of the session evolved to be: 1.) Make connections between Undergraduate day students and international students through discovering similarities and differences 2.) Learn about the cultures and daily experiences of the international students – at their home countries and here at SNHU; and 3.) Experience how available technology can facilitate exchanges and connections among students. Our unstated goal was to begin the process of breaking down stereotypes. To achieve those goals domestic students researched their partner's country and prepared for an interview session during class time. The parameters of the interview questions were determined by the professor, but included course-specific questions along with more open and/or personal inquiries. For example, educational technology students included questions on international students' use of digital tools and technology in the classroom while general education students asked questions about the school systems and cultural practices of the students' homeland.

During the session, the format is a mix of teacher-directed discussion to start, followed by partner or small group interviewing, with whole group debriefing to conclude. During the session, interview pairs used Google Earth on an interactive white board to show where each person lives in the world. This provided a powerful visual for understanding distances between countries as well as specific geographic and cultural features of a place. As one education student commented,

I thought I knew a lot about other cultures before I interviewed [my partner]. But once he started showing me places from his country on Google Earth and telling me interesting facts, I realized how little I knew. It was astounding how much new information I obtained from our conversation and the power points we were shown. This experience made me want to interact more with other cultures.

International students were also impressed with being able to show domestic students their home country. A student from China noted, "I also appreciated the magic and power of Google Earth function that can let us find the destination easily without going outside." A student from Saudi Arabia exclaimed, "Google Earth is magnificent software that showed me how small the world could be in a way that I could show someone in the United States my home thousands of miles away."

An assessment of the experience was gathered through written and oral reflections. Students recorded their reflections in a class podcast posted to iTunesU. By being posted online, artifacts of students' reflections and learning earned a measure of importance beyond the course.

In Model II, students were combined for a total of two classes over an eight-week period. The first session was the same as Model I. The second class was devoted to minipresentations using PowerPoint or Prezi. These were "small talks" using four or five slides or images to capture the results of the



experience. The presentations were done individually or jointly by pairs of prospective teachers and international students. The presentations included a verbal explanation and reflection of what students learned about their cultures and specifically about one another. In addition, students wrote reflection papers assessing if the pre-determined goals had been met, engaged in an online discussion forum (using Blackboard), and/or recorded a podcast of their reflections. When students chose to work jointly, the common goal of creating a presentation served as a cohesive agent, bringing them closer together. Asking students to reflect on the experience evoked strong feelings of camaraderie with the international students and provided an effective model for promoting reflective practice among prospective teachers.

Model III was three class sessions; it expanded on Model II by adding a class in between the initial interview (session 1) and presentation day (session 3). For session 2, students met in order to more intimately and comprehensively share traditions and cultures. This session was held out of the classroom in another setting. For example, one semester our classes met in a large conference room on campus – a very conducive setting for mingling. Students decided what they wanted to share. For example, during the fall exchanges, domestic students brought pumpkins to carve and other fall-related activities. The international students brought traditional dress, as well as items highlighting cultural and historical information, visuals and music from their home country. They also created PowerPoint presentations that were highly informative for education students who gained awareness of other cultures, traditions, and places.

In Model III, the collaborative project was a podcast that each pair or group of students created. Each team, comprised of domestic and international students, interviewed each other, and then wrote and produced a podcast. When professors Rogers and Riabov first started using podcasting, they used the theme of *current issues* facing domestic and international students in order to engage students in the joint project. In more recent sessions, they allowed the groups to select their own topics. Not surprisingly, the student products were creative and meaningful to the participants. Education students discovered commonalities, as well as differences, between their own culture and those of their international peers on campus. Students also reflected on the experience and recorded that reflection in a podcast. Having a recording not only addressed the issue of long-term availability and reaching a wider audience, but also became a useful tool for language instruction for the international students.

In order to produce a podcast, the international students had to engage many language skills: discuss a topic, listen to their American partners, script a podcast text working with native speakers, do research on the topic, exchange e-mails with their partners and sometimes use Skype. The podcast was posted on the SNHU iTunes site so that international students could return to it and practice their pronunciation and do self assessment of their speech comparing it to the native speakers. The international students also recorded their reflections and posted them on the iTunes site. Since Blackboard courses are no longer accessible after the semester is over, all the students have long-term access to the Prezi and PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, pictures, and audio and video files through the Culture Exchange Combined Classes website (Riabov, 2011). In this way, students' learning and their artifacts from the experience are made public and are available long after the course is over.

Professors Rogers and Riabov continue to collect data on how students are reacting to the evolving models. The response has been overwhelmingly positive and at times moving. As one education student summarized, "This experience has really made a difference in my life and has made me a better person by branching out to other types of people." An international student noted, "Before that class, I didn't know how to communicate with the domestic students. I didn't think they were so friendly and they could understand me so well. Now, I know we can communicate like friends." Survey data continue to reflect a high frequency of agreement that this was a worthwhile and educational experience. A recent

indicator of success that we have become aware of is the number of times domestic students and international students have become Facebook friends. Again, technology has served to enhance the face-to-face interaction and offered maintainability of the connection.

## Conclusion

This article examined two faculty members' collaboration and their ongoing experience and discoveries in combining domestic and international students. Facilitating a global perspective and cultural competence in prospective teachers and assisting in language development for international students are worthwhile goals on any university or school campus. Part of the mission of professors Rogers and Riabov has been to inform colleagues at the secondary and post-secondary levels about their work. To that end, they have made presentations at the Christa McAuliffe Technology conference (Nashua, NH), New Hampshire Council for Social Studies (Manchester, NH), and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference (Boston, MA). The authors thank Education Dean Mary Heath, ILE Chair Tim DiMatteo, and the SNHU Instructional Support teams for their ongoing assistance in helping us connect diverse students on campus. ■

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## Appendix A: Pre-Post Survey for Education Students

Likert Scale:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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#	Question	Response
1	Before the exchange, I was uncertain about meeting and talking with an international student.	
2	Combining classes with the Institute for Language Education was a worthwhile experience.	
3	I have had experiences like this in my other SNHU classes.	
4	I learned many things about international students that I did not know before.	
5	I feel that our class time would have been better spent on our content.	
6	International students are a good resource for learning about other cultures.	
7	My understanding of international students changed in a positive way.	
8	I am more likely now to interact with an international student on campus.	
9	This experience has made me consider a study abroad program.	
10	This experience has made me consider traveling to see another country.	
11	I have learned about the importance of culture and diversity in other SNHU classes.	
12	I would like to have this experience in another class at SNHU.	
13	I would like to participate in more cultural exchanges on campus.	
14	All SNHU students should experience a cultural exchange with the international students.	
15	I feel I have made a new friend on campus because of this experience.	



## Appendix B: Pre-Post Survey For ESL Students

Respond to these statements by checking a corresponding box

#	Questions	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Communicating with American students helps to learn American culture.				
2	I have a good opportunity to meet with American students on campus.				
3	It is easy to meet and make friends with American students on campus.				
4	Communicating with American students can help me to improve my English.				
5	American students are good resources to learn about American culture.				
6	I would like to have an experience attending a class with American students.				
7	Having a combined class will help me to develop confidence for my future studies in college.				
8	I would like to interview American students.				
9	I would like to tell American students about my country and culture.				
10	I believe that exchanging ideas about the culture and values of our countries can help develop mutual understanding and friendship.				

## Appendix C: Online Discussion Board Reflection Questions:

### Education Class

1. How was your experience in meeting the international students?
2. To what extent do you think our class goals were achieved?
3. What was the role of technology in this experience?
4. Why is it important for future teachers to have this type of exchange?

### ESL Class

1. What was your impression of studying with American students?
2. What have you learned different or similar from American point of view on the topic that you discussed?
3. Did you have a good experience practicing speaking with domestic students?
4. Did this experience help you to develop confidence for your future classes in college?
5. What have you learned from the interviews?
6. Will you continue communication with these students beyond the class time?
7. What kind of questions did you discuss during the interviews?
8. What did you like the most of these classes?
9. Would you like to have more such classes?

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