

Four Strategies for Teaching Open-Mindedness

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Over the last 40 years I have spent thousands of hours observing teachers across Africa, Asia, and North America teach about the world in order to understand how schools create student understanding, appreciation and engagement in their interconnected world. This research culminated last year as I worked online with 130 teachers in International Baccalaureate schools and programs in 43 nations to learn how their day-to-day instruction addresses goals of global citizenship education. From these experiences, one focus stands out as a prerequisite in addressing goals in global education — the development of “open-mindedness.”

An open mind — the willingness to consider experiences, beliefs, values, perspectives, etc. that differ from one’s own — allows the learner to explore how diverse people across the world think and act. Open-mindedness creates opportunities to rethink assumptions, identify misinformation, and consider alternative ways to make decisions. Open-mindedness is critical in teaching students to understand how contextual factors (economic, historical, religious, geographic, political, and technological) shape the way people in their own neighborhood, or across the world, think and live.

It is easy for young American students to see an image or hear a story and think, “Those people are strange,” simply because they do something in an unfamiliar way. Why would modern day Mongols live in tents when we don’t? Why would women in rural Sierra Leone carry their babies on their backs instead of in strollers? Yet, if open-mindedness is valued, teachers provide the contextual factors that shape these decisions, and students come to appreciate why people make different choices. If we want students to understand their interconnected world and its peoples, we must provide students with the experiences, knowledge, and skills needed for them to be receptive to and appreciate the diversity of human experience, knowledge, and belief systems.

In this article, I share four strategies for increasing open-mindedness that I have learned from teachers identified as exemplary global educators. These are methods that work best if used regularly in grades PreK-8, and they can be scaffolded to meet the developmental needs and backgrounds of specific students. There are, of course, other pedagogies that fit local political, economic, or cultural contexts.

1) Make Cross-Cultural Interaction Ordinary

Back in the early 1990s, I was invited to a school in Columbus, Ohio where, for the first time, students were able to type in questions on a computer, and students in Switzerland responded so that an online conversation took place in the school auditorium. School board members, reporters, even a local politician, were there to observe. It was a really big deal, a benchmark moment for the students, teachers, and the district. In contrast, for the last few years, I have worked with another school in Columbus where, several times a month, students interact with people from other nations. Sometimes, they discuss culture and current events through Skype with students in Taiwan. Other times, they work online with an iEARN project in Eastern Europe on environmental issues. And, at least once a month, the students welcome peers from Somalia (who attend a welcome center school across town) into their classroom to discuss books or stories. For these students, it is normal to communicate with people from other countries. Because the students do so regularly each year in science, social studies, language arts and



A girl feeding parrots at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, Queensland, Australia.

commons.wikimedia.org



Adam Jones/adamjones.freeservers.com

A boy plays on a merry-go-round in Cordoba, Argentina.



F. Reus / commons.wikimedia.org

A young girl of the Bozo people along the Niger River in Bamako, Mali.

even, occasionally, math, they have mastered many skills in intercultural communication. To them, it is an ordinary school day when they discuss a story, an oil spill, or the meaning of leadership with people from Poland, China, or Brazil.

How does such interaction promote “openmindedness”? The students become comfortable hearing accents and interacting with people who dress, think, or act different from what they are used to seeing in their community. As they build relationships and become comfortable with people who have had experiences different from their own, they begin to see many differences as value neutral. “Just because she wears a head scarf does not make her a bad person, any more than me wearing a bikini makes me a bad person. We simply have different ways of dressing,” said a sixth grade student, after interacting with a woman from Jordan. Children learn authentic skills in intercultural communication, as they become sensitive to others’ cultural norms and values. Students learn how to show respect to older people in China, not for a unit test, but because they are talking to them in real time. They know what questions are too personal to ask a stranger in Egypt, and they come to care about Egyptian cultural norms because they want to continue to talk to people there. Cross-cultural interaction also leads us to rethink popular stereotypes and misinformation.

2) Challenge Stereotyping, Prejudgment, and Overgeneralization

“Why are they so poor?” a boy asks when the class is shown a film on child workers in rug factories in Pakistan and India. “They are dirty! Those people don’t care about children,” a girl chimes in. Unfortunately, many teachers let such comments slide instead of using them as a teachable moment to help students deconstruct the prejudgment and generalizations being made. Students need to understand why some people live in poverty, why some people continue to be discriminated against locally and globally, and how people around the world resist oppression

and work towards equality and rights.

When a sixth grade teacher heard such comments, he told his students about people who have organized to combat child labor. He showed *Free The Children*, a documentary that tells the real-life stories of two 12 year old boys, Iqbal Masih in Pakistan and Craig Kielburger in Canada, who fought to improve the lives of child workers.¹ Other teachers begin by discussing the fact that many baseballs, running shoes, and other goods with which their students are familiar are manufactured overseas. This helps students become aware of economic situations in other places and counter negative assumptions in order to teach about how global inequities affect children’s lives across the planet.

Most students around the world come to school with stereotypes or misinformation about other cultures. Whether because of films, other media representations, or remarks heard within their community, even young Americans may think “those _____ people (fill in the blank with a local or global ethnic, political, racial or religious group) are all poor, violent, scary,” or something worse. A few years ago, I visited a third grade classroom where the teacher was beginning a unit on South Africa. She began by asking, “What do you know about South Africa?” The students’ hands shot up, and their replies were grouped on the board into these generalities: there are lots of wild animals, people don’t wear clothes or live in houses, it is a hot jungle, and people are starving and poor. When she asked them, “Why would you like to visit South Africa?” over 80 percent of the responses were related to seeing wild animals. Other responses focused on seeing people who eat bugs, carry spears, play drums, etc.

To counter such stereotypes and misinformation, the teacher provided students with activities that addressed their misperceptions as they learned mandated content. The students worked with online visuals of diverse South African families and their communities in rural, urban, and suburban communities today; vegetation and climate maps (There’s much savanna and some

forested areas, but no “jungles!” the students were amazed to discover); a video of small town life recorded by a local returned Peace Corps volunteer; and menus from some restaurants in Durban, Soweto, and Cape Town. The students also visited websites of some South African elementary schools to see what they were reading and looked at some sections of online South African newspapers.² To learn about apartheid, economic inequities, and political change in South African children’s lives since 1990, they compared picture books — *Journey to Jo'burg with The Day Gogo Went to Vote* — and then discussed the books with two South African students who were attending a local university.³

By the end of the unit, these activities had opened students’ minds. Misinformation and misunderstanding were replaced with an awareness of the many commonalities that students shared with South Africans, balanced by an awareness of the many differences that one finds among South Africans themselves. Students began to recognize that broad generalizations about a nation are often misleading. What we see in the American films and news may be quite different from the realities that people in those places are experiencing, or what those people are concerned about. (**Sidebar A: Resources**)

3) Demonstrate Ways to Learn from Ordinary People

Openmindedness grows by leaps and bounds when students learn directly from ordinary people from another culture, rather than exclusively from minorities in a society. For example, it would be a mistake to teach students about U.S. society by looking only at Amish life, but that’s exactly what we do if we teach about Kenya by focusing on the Masai. Likewise, we can lead students to a narrow understanding of another culture by learning only about elites (government leaders, royalty, or the very wealthy) or victims (people living in dire conditions such as the very poor, or those caught up in a current conflict or environmental disaster).

Another way to obtain a narrow view of another society is to rely exclusively on educational materials created by Americans for consumption by students in U.S. schools. There is a significant difference in learning about Mexico or China only from U.S. sources and learning about these countries and their peoples through their own writers, news reporters, scholars, and educators.

Today, there are many online sources created by ordinary people in other countries. Schools, local organizations, and average people writing blogs or sharing photos and videos have websites, and many of these allow students to view images of everyday life (**Sidebar B: Everyday Life**). Finally, there are people from other countries in U.S. communities, immigrants and visitors who may be willing to share their knowledge and cross-cultural experiential learning. Invite them into your classroom as guest speakers.

Students need to see that teachers value what people in other countries have to say — their stories, reactions, and ideas. When



A boy and girl harvest farm crops in Egypt in 2006.

students leave school having read only U.S. authors on history, current issues, or key social studies concepts (such as community, democracy, rights, revolution, freedom), they will have American-centric blinders on. However, if from kindergarten on, they have read stories, autobiographies, news, and popular culture pieces from people in different world regions, they will be well on their way to understanding and appreciating what the other 95 percent of the world’s people think about the past and present. If we value international understanding, we need to incorporate international children’s literature, films, videos, and websites into our classroom activities.

4) Teach the Habit of Seeking Out Multiple Perspectives

Even five year olds recognize that people in their lives have different perspectives. Perspective consciousness is:

The recognition that our view of the world is not universally shared, that this view of the world has been and continues to be shaped by influences that often escape conscious detection, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one’s own.⁴

Skills in perspective consciousness and the habit of seeking out different perspectives help students recognize how people interpret events and issues in quite different ways based on their backgrounds and experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and values. When we hear children comment, “He thinks we should not go there!” or “She says it is not right!” then we know they recognize that a sibling, parent, or classmate, may perceive things differently than they do. When students come to recognize that people have their reasons for seeing things in different ways, they can move on to examining different ways of thinking within cultural, political, and other contexts. They can begin to accept that different perspectives are part of being human, and that it is important to understand why people have different frames of reference.

Sidebar A

Recommended Online Resources

Africa Access, www.africaaccessreview.org

Excellent database on children's books and other resources for teaching about Africa.

Ask Asia, www.askasia.org

Outstanding resources for teaching about Asian cultures. Global TeachNet www.rpcv.org/pages/globalteachnet.cfm Newsletter, listserv, study tours, awards.

The International Education and Resource Network (iEARN), www.iearn.org

Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections, www.iecc.org These two organizations connect teachers and students with projects and people in other countries.

Resource Center of the Americas, www.americas.org

This website lists children's books and other resources on Latin cultures, issues, and daily life.

Teaching for Change, www.teachingforchange.org

This organization recommends videos and children's books and offers free materials for teachers on diverse cultures and countries and on issues of inequity, prejudice, and conflict.

Teaching Tolerance, www.splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/tt-index.html.

This journal for teachers offers free teaching ideas, videos, and book reviews.

In developing skills in perspective consciousness with young students, teachers often begin by asking students to identify differences in ways that people with whom they interact think about daily decisions (What does my family do that others don't do? Who is considered a "good person"?) or the ways they perceive local events (What demographic changes are happening in our neighborhood?) or issues in the classroom (What does one do to show respect to a teacher or a visitor?). Building on such examples, students can generate reasons why other people have different viewpoints "Why do you think your family wants you to dress a certain way?" "Why might some people disagree?"

Once students are able to distinguish their own perspectives from those of others and to recognize that people may have legitimate reasons for seeing things differently, they have the foundation for studying more complex and significant differences in perspectives, such as those of refugees moving into their own community, or children in Afghanistan or Syria depicted on television. The goal is teaching students the habit of the mind of seeking out and examining other points of view. The true test of progress is when students are no longer satisfied with hearing one point of view, and actively seek more information.

I observed this phenomenon in a fifth grade class. After a unit on the Great Depression, where students learned about the

Sidebar B

Showing Everyday Life in Different Lands

See photos and videos showing people walking on the street (www.hbc.co.jp/susukino.html)

"Visit" children in other countries

(www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/kidsweb/wakeup/index.htm)

Learn from children's cultural or religious organizations

(www.palestine-child.org or www.islam4kids.com)

Develop projects with people in other countries

(www.orillas.org/welcomee.html)

Check out school sites through One World Classroom

(www.ccph.com)

Connect students and teachers to people and projects around the globe through the International Education and Resource Network

(iEARN at www.iearn.org)

personal experiences of many kinds of people (men, women, African Americans, whites, Indians, rich and poor, etc.), they were no longer satisfied with American mainstream perspectives on the beginning of World War II. They wanted to know how Asian Americans perceived what Japan was doing and how German Americans felt about Hitler. Through previous units, they had learned that Americans often have many different ideas about such issues as states' rights, suffrage, the role of the government in the economy, and conflicts overseas. Now they began to apply these ideas to the new places they were learning about. Perspective consciousness has applications in conflict management, as students learn to appreciate the insights gained from seeing events and issues from the eyes of others, even when they do not agree with other people's points of view.

Conclusion

The world is complex, and instructional time is short. The key is using that time to teach knowledge and skills that create international understanding and engagement. **Table 1** (p.22) presents choices that teachers say they make to create open-mindedness in their students. Alternative choices were generated to show how day-to-day decisions can shape students' dispositions toward open-mindedness.

From kindergarten on, elementary teachers make choices that can either lead to open-minded and globally-aware citizens, interested and engaged in diverse cultures — or to young adults who know little about the world beyond our borders, think their version of the American way is the only way, and have no interest in people different from themselves. How all of us choose profoundly affects our lives and conditions on our globe, now and in the future. 🌐

Teaching Openmindedness: Dos and Don'ts

Practices that do NOT support the development of open-mindedness	Practices that DO support the development of open-mindedness
Only teach one mainstream point of view, and that other viewpoints are wrong	Teach students to recognize and understand underlying assumptions and values in their own perspectives and how they change over time.
Imply that other people are inferior so that there is no need to understand why they think the way they do.	Teach students to analyze multiple perspectives as part of understanding how different people view events and issues, make decisions, and have conflicts.
Assume that Americans know why people in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East behave the way they do (so there is no reason to ask them or read their work).	Have students develop the habit of examining primary sources on the experiences, knowledge, beliefs and values that shape diverse people's worldviews.
Generalize that all people in a culture, country or region are the same.	Do not allow overgeneralizations about a culture, nation, or region.
Ignore stereotypical images and attitudes students may have about other peoples and cultures.	Identify stereotypes and misinformation students bring to class then address them directly through media and interaction.
Use exotic images to motivate students to be interested in a place or people (people eating bugs, wearing "traditional" clothes, harem scenes, etc).	Teach students to recognize how exotica may interfere with cultural understanding.
Ignore or play down commonalities between "us and them," and do not teach cultural universals.	Aim for a balance between cultural differences and commonalities. Teach students to examine ideas and practices shared across cultures as described by those people.
Use only American sources to teach about other cultures, world history, and current events.	Use primary sources such as literature, documents, newspapers, websites, etc. from the culture under study.
Don't encourage students to interact with ordinary people from other cultures or nations. Avoid educational websites that provide such activities.	Have students interact with people from other cultures and appreciate their insights. Directly teach cross-cultural skills in communication and collaboration.
Avoid teaching about intersections of stereotyping, prejudice, and power.	Teach about prejudice and discrimination within and across diverse world regions.
Use images or content about a culture that are out of date or unrepresentative. Allow students to think some cultures are static.	Teach about the dynamic nature of cultural change and diffusion, how cultural norms change over time in people's lives today. Help students understand how cultural changes affect minorities and indigenous peoples.
Avoid connecting students to people in other places who share similar issues and problems.	Teach economic, political, cultural, environmental and other connections between their students and people from other cultures. Provide learning experiences to connect students with people in other countries, which is easier to do in the age of the Internet.

Notes

1. The video *Free the Children* (\$16.95 plus shipping) and other materials are available through www.freethechildren.org. This organization, begun by a 12-year-old Canadian boy, has grown into an international network of children helping children at a local, national, and international level through representation, leadership, and action.
2. Websites for schools, online newspapers, and other media can be found in the Connections modules for five world regions, www.teachglobaled.net.

3. Beverly Naidoo, *Journey to Jo'burg* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985); Elinor Batezat Sisulu, *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1996).
4. Robert Hanvey, *An Attainable Global Perspective* (New York: The War/Peace Center, 1976).

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