

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

**FROM
THEORY
TO
PRACTICE**

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It was in October of 2009 when **GLASPORT** first convened with funding provided by a Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant. The grant proposal was submitted by then Glastonbury Assistant Superintendent of Schools (and former Foreign Language Director) Christine Brown. The committee was charged with two ambitious objectives: 1) to aid in the development of national assessment tools to improve the articulation of curriculum and instruction over time from elementary/high school to higher education, and 2) to develop a process across the nation and across levels for the collection of student work samples in an electronic portfolio system. To that aim, a task force was created from a cross section of elementary through college level educators as well as representatives of leading foreign language organizations and state agencies. For the ensuing four years, meetings were held every fall and spring to brainstorm ideas, collaborate on prompts and generate the criteria for a rubric in an attempt to meet the objectives stated in the grant.

Included in the grant was funding to assist The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to develop an online assessment system. As a result, the Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) made its debut as a pilot test for Glastonbury students in the spring of 2009. The ecstatic student response was positive recognition of the many hours that had been spent filming native speakers of Chinese and Russian in real-life situations, requiring meaningful student responses. The students were absolutely hooked! Comments such as “Wasn’t like a test at all!” or “Wow, that was really fun!” gave the test developers a good reason to smile. With that endorsement, Arabic was soon added to the assessment repertoire. The AAPPL assesses three modes of communication: 1) interpersonal listening and speaking, 2) presentational writing and 3) interpretive reading and writing. It is now available in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

The task force committee was keenly aware that the study of a foreign language has “collateral benefits” and this concept was discussed/addressed many times during our taskforce meetings. What are students gaining from the study of another language besides the ability to communicate? Which types of adjustment is the brain making when a student studies multiple foreign languages? Does the study of another language affect a student’s ability to think critically? How does learning a second language make the student a global citizen? These questions provided many hours of meaningful and thoughtful dialog among task force members. In turn, this enabled

the Glastonbury Public Schools’ taskforce committee to consider three constructs that we could possibly assess and perhaps, with a thoughtfully crafted rubric, measure as well: metalinguistic awareness, reflective judgment and intercultural competence.

Our first attempt to elicit evidence of student learning outside of communication skills resulted in the creation of “Dinner with a Host Family” prompt in the spring of 2010. This was a volunteer oral interview in place of the senior final exam that placed the child as an exchange student seated at the dinner table with a host parent. With scripted questions the teacher led the student through an oral interview which culminated with an uncomfortable twist – the need for the student to defend the educational system of his home country. Each filmed interview was 10-15 minutes in length and was transcribed for the task force to peruse at the next meeting. Although students were captivated by the challenge of this type of assessment and claimed that it really did give them the chance to “show their stuff” the intended outcome/goal was not achieved. We were not able to find ample evidence of the constructs that we had identified (metalinguistic awareness, reflective judgment and intercultural competence) in our interviews. After discussion, the taskforce determined that it was best to assess one construct through a series of prompts.

Following our dinner with the host family prompt, we interviewed several students to discover which strategies they developed when they did not know a vocabulary word, appropriate social cue or response to an uncomfortable question. Having a student reflect on his/her learning is a not a skill that is taught by all teachers, or practiced by all students. Thus, it is a difficult skill to measure. The dilemma of measuring critical thinking skills was solved by a chance meeting with Harvard scholar Zachary Stein, representing *Lectica*, a group working in the field of brain research. As a consultant to the grant and a relationship with Developmental Testing Service, Glastonbury students were included in field tests referred to as DiscoTests (<http://www.lectica.org>). After two administrations of testing given to the same students over the course of a year, our students’ critical thinking skills were measured in relation to their study of one or more foreign languages. Glastonbury’s results were compared to other schools in the *Lectica* database of a wide variety of cohorts, some of whom are not afforded the breadth and scope of foreign languages that Glastonbury has been able to offer for more than 50 years – Chinese, French, Greek, Latin, Russian, Spanish, (with Spanish beginning in grade 1).

Additionally, we created a prompt targeted to-

wards our elementary students, who begin studying Spanish in grade one. We wanted to demonstrate that these “collateral benefits” were already showing up in the elementary years as well. We created a prompt that was administered to our fifth grade students that asked them to begin by thinking about what they know about open air markets in Ecuador. This was followed by a video where an American student was visiting Ecuador and learning about the cultural practice of bargaining for items in an open air market. The video was turned off before students see the end, and they were asked to predict what would happen next, and to compare what they had seen to what they know about making purchases in the United States of America. This is a great example of how we could begin to assess these skills in the elementary levels and show growth over the years as proficiency and exposure increase.

The very last construct under consideration, and the one that captured the attention of the entire task force, was intercultural competence. As language educators know, a student needs far more than linguistic skills to maneuver appropriately in the target culture. Guided by the expertise of Dr. Michael Byram, noted U.K. educator and author of *From Foreign*

Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship, the task force developed the rubric needed to guide future prompt development.

Our objective was to show that the “collateral benefits” of language study, in addition to proficiency and cultural knowledge, the following were increased reflective judgment, or critical thinking skills, metalinguistic awareness, and intercultural competence. The original *Dinner with the Host Family* prompt was designed to assess these three skills, which we argued were byproducts of a long sequence of language instruction. We quickly realized that these are very difficult constructs to assess, but also, nearly impossible to assess thoroughly in the context of one task. In our work with the task force which met twice a year, we narrowed our focus to work on assessing intercultural competence. Through research, discussion and analysis of student work samples, we focused on the work of Dr. Michael Byram.

Since our first exploration of this topic, consideration around intercultural competence has become more prevalent in language education. At the time, however, it seemed that we were approaching uncharted territory in trying to develop a rubric that would assess this construct. Our goal was to take intercultural competence from theory to practice in the classroom, and to incorporate it more thoughtfully and deliberately into the curriculum, instruction and assessment. We quickly identified the issues that needed to be addressed in order to accomplish this goal:

- develop a rubric that used language which was more user friendly for teachers and students so that people would gain a greater understanding what intercultural competence is, but

The Shoe Box Story

Sometimes the least complicated answer is the best answer. Our task force learned this as we embarked on a five-year assessment grant project to enhance performance and proficiency in Arabic, Chinese and Russian. In one memorable instance, we found ourselves overwhelmed by the sheer amount of electronic portfolios available. Which would suit our foreign language students’ needs perfectly? As we puzzled over this, we asked a third grade Spanish learner, “Where do you store your most prized mementos?” and learned his solution: “In a shoe box under my bed!” This young man’s intuitive response helped us to reevaluate our method of thinking. His instant solution to the problem is delightfully recalled by many of the task force members as proof that on occasion, a little bit of levity is effective in the face of a complex project.

also what it is not;

- create templates for prompts that could be adapted for different languages, levels and cultural foci; and,
- look at our own existing curriculum and units and identify areas where the topics and activities naturally lend themselves to a more deliberate inclusion of intercultural competence.

RUBRIC DEVELOPMENT

Through Michael Byram’s work, we identified the most significant components of intercultural competence and attempted to break them down into succinct, assessable behaviors. Another goal of this process was to create a rubric that was not punitive; in other words, we did not want to fail a student for not demonstrating intercultural competence, but rather identify areas for growth not only for students, but for teachers as well. Therefore, instead of choosing ratings such as exceeds expectations, meets expectations, or does not meet expectations,

we chose more simplified and direct wording: present, not present, and not observable. This way, in the beginning stages, we could simply see if students were exhibiting the components of intercultural competence or not, and perhaps in future stages, discuss more in depth to what degree.

We quickly realized how difficult it was to assess multiple constructs with the *Dinner with the Host Family* prompt and we now knew that it was extremely difficult to develop an assessment that assesses all of the complex components of intercultural competence. We also realized that the rubric could be something that a teacher uses throughout the year, with multiple forms of and opportunities for assessment. A teacher could give an assessment that focuses solely on the attitude’s aspect of intercultural competence, or in a subsequent unit could work on an activity that focuses on another aspect of intercultural competence. The goal would be to provide multiple opportunities, embedded in the curriculum (and ideally in the target language), over the course of the year where opportunities were presented to touch upon each component of intercultural competence contained in the rubric.

CREATION OF TEMPLATES

One of the initial goals was to create a bank of prompts for various languages and levels. We quickly concluded this would be a nearly impossible task to design prompts that would address the individual and unique needs of any given course. While we are familiar with the cultural foci in the curriculum of the courses offered in our language program, this could differ greatly depending on the length, frequency and duration of exposure to language in different schools and colleges throughout the United States and abroad. We understood that we needed to create a generic template which would initiate conversation. Our ultimate goal remained constant: the more teachers understand what intercultural competence is, and how it can be incorporated into what they are already doing, it could become a natural extension of what already exists in a previously developed curriculum.

Our initial template consisted of students creating a presentation, skit, dialogue, film, or other product that demonstrated a

knowledge and understanding of a cultural aspect of the target culture. We emphasized that this should not promote cultural stereotypes. We piloted the template in various classes and languages. Some examples included students presenting an article from the target culture that presents a problem within that culture, such as cyber-bullying. Other examples included a skit on some of the cultural practices in Russian culture, or with our fifth grade language students, a video that introduced the cultural practice of bargaining for items in an open air market in Ecuador. Not only did students create, or present these topics, but we developed some post-viewing questions that attempted to generate discussion and promote questioning about the cultural topics presented. Another interesting discovery from this process is that the focus cannot be on the product per se, but the process by which one gets to the product, and also that discussion which is generated by presenting and exploring these topics in the classroom. It is evident that intercultural competence is not a clear-cut skill, and the process by which one gains intercultural competence is complex, but rather a process by which one gains understanding and insight, and indeed a skill that is only improved upon by ongoing exposure to different aspects of various cultures over a prolonged period of time.

WHY REINVENT THE WHEEL?

Within our own department, we have had the opportunity to have teachers pilot the template, develop their own projects that attempt to incorporate intercultural competence, and view different samples testing out the rubric. In presenting the teachers with our work, we had a few underlying goals. We not only wanted teachers to gain a better understanding of what intercultural competence is and how we can assess it, but we wanted them to understand and realize that this is not a new notion. The idea of incorporating it more explicitly and deliberately into the curriculum might be a new notion, but this is certainly something that we have already been doing in our district and we needed to bring it to the forefront in their thinking. In addition, we wanted them to understand that they do not need to re-write the curriculum, since our thematic-based *Understanding by Design* curriculum is already set up to embrace the aspects of intercultural competence. Teachers could easily take any unit in any language or level and either tweak or expand upon an already existing activity or lesson within that unit. This was important not only to

reduce anxiety, but also to help teachers see the connection between where we are now and where we want to take our students.

In order to continue the conversation and pique interest, we created a departmental objective for the year (that was optional) for teachers to continue to explore the components of intercultural competence and how to incorporate it into the existing curriculum or course of study as well as how to assess it. Additionally, we offered a course on intercultural competence, taught by Dr. Manuela Wagner, Associate Professor of Foreign Language Education at the University of Connecticut (UConn), who not only teaches this course at the UConn, but also is part of the **GLASPORT** task force.

NEXT STEPS

This spring, we have also been presenting, in greater detail, this topic at our department meetings grades 1-12. We have shared student work, given examples of prompts, taken existing units and developed examples of how activities could be created and tweaked to address intercultural competence more explicitly. These sessions helped teachers become more comfortable with discussing and sharing ideas, successes and failures in order to engage in deeper conversation. On more than one occasion, I have heard teachers comment on a situation or scenario saying “that would be a great idea for assessing intercultural competence”. This is a notable sign of success for our task force, because we have slowly but surely guided teachers to see the importance and value of intercultural competence, and now it has become part of the professional conversation. By increasing awareness in teachers and by more explicitly including it in the curriculum on a consistent basis, means that our students will also have an increased awareness. Bringing intercultural competence from theory to practice has certainly been a process, but through the work of our FLAP grant and **GLASPORT**, there is now an increased awareness about the role of intercultural competence and how it is a natural byproduct of language also in addition to being an essential 21st Century Skill.

As the FLAP grant draws to a close at the end of this academic year, we are in total amazement at how much we have discovered and accomplished. We are poised to share our newly acquired knowledge at ACTFL 2013 in Orlando, Florida where we will focus on Intercultural Competence, and how it is incorporated into curriculum and assessment. Our goal is for participants

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to leave with suggestions on how to effectively incorporate intercultural competence into existing units and lessons or to modify the learning appropriately. Session attendees will be able to pilot it in their own learning environments with support from the **GLASPORT** teachers. Additionally session attendees will be invited to participate in a free webinar series sponsored by Glastonbury Public Schools on this topic. Professional collaboration will be ongoing throughout the 2013-2014 school year with additional SKYPE or other online means, coordinated through Glastonbury to support this pilot throughout the year.

Note: This was the definition developed by the participants in the Intercultural Competence Course – 2013:

Intercultural competence is not about knowing everything about another culture but rather recognizing cultural nuances and being able to adapt/understand without judgment. It is understanding that culture is a very complex and changing concept and you cannot look at it just from the surface. It is not about answers, but rather the questions that are generated by curiosity and observation.