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Beyond Getting It Done: Developing Literacy and Global Competencies

Are You Learning, or Are You Just Getting It Done?

By Maureen Connolly

When I asked my 11 Advanced Placement (AP) students to reflect on their experience in school, the overwhelming response was that students were frustrated with a system in which they felt more of a need to get things done than to actually learn. These top students were very good at responding to the pressures of handing in assignments on time, studying material and regurgitating it for tests, and writing based on formulaic outlines. They were very good at “getting it done.” They longed for a system in which *learning* was more valuable than completion of tasks. Based on this conversation, we hung up a sign at the front of the room that asked, “Are you learning, or are you just getting it done?” We started thinking together about the purpose of our assignments, the value of the information students would hopefully retain, and the significance of the skills that students were developing. Were students cracking the code to get a 5 on their AP exam, or were they becoming lifelong learners equipped with 21st Century Skills, prepared to impact their world in a positive, meaningful way?

This question of developing lifelong skills and understandings has been addressed by the Capacities of Literate Individuals Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in the Content Areas¹.

While this article will touch on all of these capacities, the main focus is the final element-- understanding perspectives and cultures. The full explanation of this element reads:

Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent different experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classics and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different from their own. (CCSSO 5)

¹ Capacities of Literate Individuals:

1. Students demonstrate independence.
2. Students build strong content knowledge.
3. Students respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.
4. Students comprehend as well as critique.
5. Students value evidence.
6. Students use technology and digital media strategically and capably.
7. Students understand other perspectives and cultures.

(CCSSO 5)

Through the EdSteps Project, The Council of Chief State School Officers worked with The Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning to develop an English Language Arts and Global Competency Matrix. This matrix includes the following four categories:

1. Students investigate the world beyond their immediate environment.
 2. Students recognize their own and others' perspectives.
 3. Students communicate their ideas effectively with diverse audiences.
 4. Students translate their ideas and findings into appropriate actions to improve conditions.
- ("Teaching for Global Competence...")

With these four categories as my guide, I will explore how to support students as they develop their global competencies, thus preparing them for college and the workplace and enabling them to have a positive impact on our global society.

Investigating the World

The English classroom is an ideal place for students to explore the world. Though I would love to suggest organizing a field trip that involves all students acquiring passports, the realist in me knows that whether or not students have the ability to travel abroad, they can develop global knowledge. A good first step is to poll students to see if anyone knows the first and last names of everyone in the class. This emphasizes the importance of being connected as a classroom community and gathering information. It also leads to an interesting discussion of the significance of names and what names represent. A great reading to accompany this experience is Tony Johnston's *Any Small Goodness*. When the main character, Arturo come home from school and says that his teacher Americanized his name to Arthur, his Abuelita tells him that the new name "burns" in her ears because he had been named for his late grandfather, and his name represents his Mexican heritage. While this reading and this investigation of names does not take students physically out of their immediate environment, it opens opportunities to explore and discuss realms far beyond the classroom and how they influence students' lives.

A more complex approach is to guide students in examining the places in which their clothing is made. They may find out about injustice related to the manufacturing of their clothing, or they may promote the practices of companies that are acting ethically in their production of goods. This experience can lead to critical decision-making beyond the classroom. When conducting research, I want to remind readers that interviews can serve as an important means of gathering information. Through Mystery Skype or iEarn.org or other comparable platforms, students can interact with youth and adults from all over the world. You may have English Language Learners (ELLs) in your school who represent some of the countries that your students are researching. By partnering mainstream students with ELLs, we can create reciprocal social opportunities, language development, and informational benefits.

Recognizing Perspectives

In my 15 years of teaching, I conducted more than 30 cookie experiments with my students. The cookie experiment involves students dividing into groups according to the world population. They are then given food in proportion to the amount available to citizens of the country that their group represents. Students elect a leader and determine how to distribute their food. It is always interesting to note the way that students respond to their surplus of food if they are representing countries with more than they need versus how they want to distribute a fraction of a cookie if they are representing countries with limited food supply. An overview of the cookie experiment can be found at: blog.education.nationalgeographic.org/2014/08/19/featured-activity-world-population-

[and-wealth-distribution-explained-with-cookies/](#). When students are involved in this experience, their perspective on world hunger and taking action shifts. Often, I had students keep their food supply within their own groups/countries. When I asked why they didn't give their surplus to another country, their response was "you didn't tell us we could." We need to tell students that once they see the world from another view, they can take action to address injustice.

Another way to have students see things from a new perspective is for them to research various countries and consider how a text would be different if the story conveyed took place in a different country. For example, how would Hester's plight in *The Scarlet Letter* change if she were living in Saudi Arabia? Students might take this a step further by researching and developing their own philosophies of education based on their understanding of education in several different countries.

Communicating Ideas

Ideas are being communicated to us all the time. Students are bombarded with images and text via their phones, computers, billboards, etc. A simple but very powerful way to consider how we communicate ideas is through analyzing advertisements. Students consider critically how advertisers use rhetoric and appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos to manipulate consumers. This is particularly interesting when conducted with the same product in different countries.

Students can apply what they observe in developing their own campaigns. For example, some of my students began a Meatless Monday campaign that involved promoting the choice to go vegetarian on Mondays. This involved interdisciplinary research and development of business writing skills which resulted in proposals sent to school administration seeking support for the campaign. Students also utilized their knowledge of the power of imagery and how to develop a catchy slogan in posters and pamphlets calling on students, staff, and faculty to take part in the movement.

Taking Action

Once students begin to broaden their perspective and develop their voice, they are eager to take action. Some of my students visited the *In Our Global Village* website at inourvillage.org and read several books written by other youth from around the world. My students were particularly excited to connect with schools in Zimbabwe, so they partnered with the US-Africa Children's Fellowship. Together with this organization, my students taught younger children about what it is like to go to school in Zimbabwe and encouraged them to help collect donations for a sister school. It should be noted that there was balance in this experience. Not only did students consider ways they could help improve what was happening in another country, they also considered strengths and shared values that they had with the students from the other country. I always work to foster students' understanding that all people have something to give and to teach us.

Another group of students developed an advocacy campaign to stop genocide in Darfur and Congo. Based on students' reading of Holocaust literature, viewing of *Hotel Rwanda*, and research on Darfur and the Congo, students developed presentations reminding us of the sentiment that we should "never forget." They made these presentations in social studies classrooms, at local town hall meetings, and ultimately went to Washington, D.C. to be part of a demonstration on the National Mall. Sadly such campaigns are still needed today.

Through each of the examples listed above, I hope to provide strong examples of how to help students develop their global competencies. I am very careful in my choice of wording here. I am writing about supporting globally *competent* students, rather than globally *competitive* students.

According to Boix Mansilla & Jackson (2011), global competency is “the capacity and disposition to understand and *act* on issues of global significance” (p. xi). While developing this competency may give students a competitive edge, I believe that it is important to note that my focus is on working together with others. Developing an understanding of cultures and experiences other than our own is likely to reveal means for working together, calling on each other’s strengths, and taking action to improve our collective global society. This is more than simply “getting it done.” This is learning with a profound purpose.

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Maureen Connolly, Ed.D. currently works for the School of Education at The College of New Jersey. Before that, she was an English teacher at Mineola High School on Long Island, NY, for 15 years. She has collaborated on numerous publications and presentations related to standards, assessment, and service learning. She believes that at the core of her profession is the need to develop purposeful learning that opens students’ eyes to the potential for positive change in themselves and in their local, national, and global communities. Her work has been published in previous editions of *The New Jersey English Journal*.