

Utilizing Technology to Build a Sense of Community with ELLs

by Alexandra McCourt

In 1916, John Dewey said, “If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.” This is true today as much as it was then. Education is constantly evolving, and in this age of technology things are moving at a much faster pace. Teachers are now feeling even more pressure to do it all: implement the Common Core State Standards in our daily lessons, prepare our students for the NYSESLAT and other state tests, and utilize technology in our teaching techniques. ESL teachers not only have to teach language skills, prepare our students for rigorous content, and incorporate technology, but also, at the same time, help our students adjust to their new environment and adapt to both their school and greater community. To this end, we created a project in which the ELL students would utilize technology to develop language skills while at the same time promote their knowledge of and interaction with the greater school community, in order to bring them together.

The project was for the ELLs to create a virtual tour of the school, interviewing various members of the school community and relating information about the places around that community. Sometimes our ESL students, because of their language limitations, feel isolated and lack the self-confidence needed to interact with their peers and members of the community. Likewise, native English speakers are reluctant to engage with ELLs because of the possible difficulty in communicating. ELLs are often reluctant to speak in English for fear of making mistakes and being laughed at or made fun of. In addition, many ELLs often do not know the roles of various community members and how to interact with them appropriately; others may also be fearful and apprehensive about approaching people they don’t know.

Getting students motivated to engage in English with native English speakers can be challenging. Motivation is one the strongest indicators of success, second only to intelligence (Skehan, 1989). Because students get excited by and want to interact with technology, creating a high level of interest leads to better participation and better language output (Swain, 1985). With the variety and mobility of our constantly evolving technological tools, teachers can differentiate for each student’s individual needs and allow for interaction outside of the classroom with the greater community. Having the students interact with members of the school community gives the students higher levels of interaction and comprehension by exposing them to various native English speakers and helps them gain knowledge about and connect with people outside their classroom (Krashen, 1985).

Prior to engaging with the people outside the classroom, students went on a in-person scouting mission to photograph, and record the people and places, and then take their digital data back to the classroom for analysis and discussion for the virtual tour. Scouting the targets before engagement assisted in developing background knowledge of the various roles and purposes, which helped the ELLs become familiar with these people and places in order to make their experience less intimidating. Before going back out into the community, the ELLs wrote, edited, and practiced their dialogues and content. By recording themselves, students were able to self-

critique and give peer feedback. Knowing that they could view their work and do retakes until they got it right allowed them to relax and have fun, while at the same time yielding a higher output level. Students were producing, reviewing, editing, and reproducing language at “pushed output” levels. Furthermore, the project’s interactivity and synthesis allowed the students to use critical thinking skills, while at the same time staying aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

Once all of writing and recording was complete, the material was then compiled together into both a presentation using Prezi and video, to be viewed by the greater school community. Students and the adult community members alike were amazed at the depth of knowledge and fluency the students displayed. The ELLs involved in the project felt a better connection to the community and were no longer hesitant to go to different places in the building or approach people in the school community. The video is now shown to new ELLs in the district, not only to acquaint them with the people and places around the school, but to also demonstrate how they too will be able to communicate and interact with the school community.

References

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Further Reading

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