

The Implications of a “Single Story” in Instructing English Language Learners

by Shari Brathwaite

Low retention is a notoriously widespread problem in the realm of adult education. An ESL teacher in pursuit of a full and engaged class will search out the principal causes of low retention and ask himself or herself if it is a variable that can be controlled to a certain extent, and if so, how? Recent research has concluded that at the heart of engagement is the student-teacher bond (Gehlbach et al., 2015). The bond is often talked about as a peripheral measure of student achievement, but research is indicating that it is in fact at the very center of it.

So, what is meant by the phrase a “single story”? It is a narrative of a person or group formed by a single, quick judgment made by the observer. This instant narrative, which lacks depth, is not the whole story but rather a fraction of a person’s life (Adichie, 2009), made in most cases from a “snap” first impression. ESL teachers should recognize that genuine bonds arise when the teachers learn, over time, the many stories each student has. Furthermore, as teachers and students recognize the similarities among their stories, a warm, welcoming environment motivates adult learners to attend and participate in class. In this way, an effective educational experience is strongly tied to the educator, building a genuine bond with students and generating classroom intimacy.

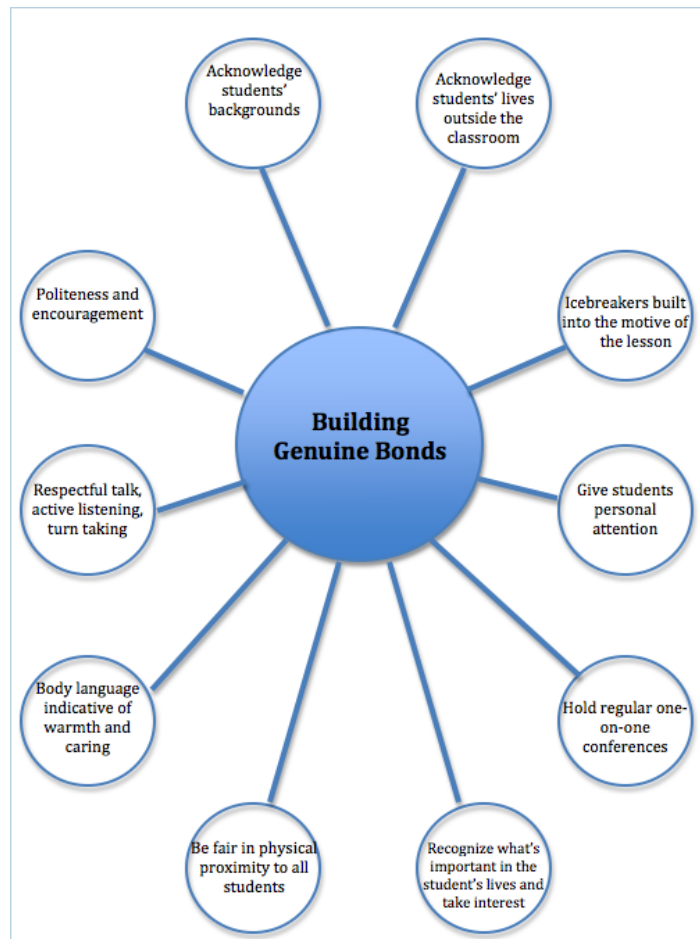
The Bond

Establishing a bond should become the *modus operandi* in the world of adult education. A parallel is the common practice among elementary school teachers to engage parents in the academic development of their child. If a child is not meeting standards, teachers put pressure on parents to help their child catch up. When the parents follow the prescription provided by the educator, oftentimes seemingly miraculous growth occurs. Why is that? Because most children are fundamentally bonded with their parents, and because that foundation is laid, learning can sprout. An outsider like a tutor would have to exert more effort because the foundation is not there. To combat the trend of low attendance, adults learning English need to feel bonded to their teacher.

A study by Gehlbach et al. (2015) shows the importance of developing teacher-student relationships. In an economically disadvantaged high school setting, 315 ninth graders and 25 of their teachers were given a “get-to-know-you” survey. The survey questions asked students and teachers about personal preferences in addition to items around the classroom. The study found that teachers and students who learned what they had in common with others perceived themselves as being more similar and students earned higher grades in the class. The achievement gap at this school decreased by over 60% (Gehlbach et al., 2015), and illustrates how learning is increased when students feel connected to the instructing authority. The findings of this study can easily applied to adult learners.

It is imperative that ESL teachers develop creative methods for engaging and bonding with adult learners. Figure 1 illustrates some methods used by the Commonwealth of Kentucky (2015) and Danielson (2007) to deepen bonds with adult learners:

Figure 1. Deepening Bonds with Adult Learners (Danielson, 2007; Kentucky, 2015)



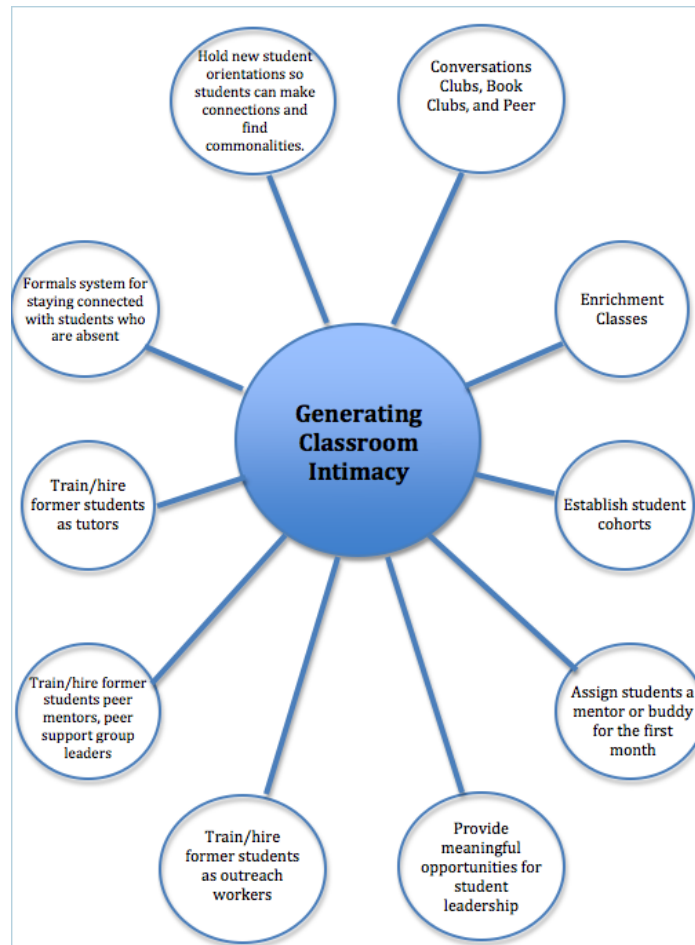
Generating Classroom Intimacy

I can imagine your instinctive shudder when you read the phrase “classroom intimacy.” Those two words are being linked for the simple reason that students in intimate learning environments exhibit more growth academically. Research shows that good writing, good problem-solving skills, and good education in the arts require sustained personal interaction. When comparing small liberal arts colleges to their larger university counterparts, it is seen that 81% of liberal arts college students graduate in four years, while only 47% of public university students finish in that time period (Ayers, 2009). The difference as a result of personal interactions in the classroom community is staggering.

Students develop “FOMO”—fear of missing out—as a byproduct of an intimate classroom setting. Classroom intimacy begins with the teacher taking interest in students’ lives outside the classroom (Danielson, 2007). In this way, teachers negate the development of a “single story” for the student, but are instead delving deeper into who the students are and what their needs may be. The teacher-student interactions are meaningful and provide ways for the two parties to find commonalities and make connections. With this support, students come to school with a sense of purpose and belonging when they feel strong ties to their teacher and classmates.

Figure 2 demonstrates ways to generate intimacy in a classroom setting, using some examples from Danielson (2007) and the Commonwealth of Kentucky (2015):

Figure 2. Generating Intimacy in a Classroom Setting (Danielson, 2007; Kentucky, 2015)



Conclusion

The value of student-teacher relationships in adult ESL is minimized in comparison to classroom rigor and student grit in teacher professional development today. But as numerous studies confirm, connectedness is central to learning. Connectedness is the mortar of the teacher-student brick house. Without it, the house disintegrates and students, especially adults, lose all interest in attending your class.

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