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## Writing The World: Ten Strategies For Internationalizing the Writing Classroom

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## **Writing the World: Ten Strategies for Internationalizing the Writing Classroom**

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In an increasingly global educational and professional environment, it is essential that new graduates are able to communicate across international and local cultural borders and barriers. Given the reach of composition classes, touching almost every undergraduate, first year writing is uniquely positioned to deliver classes that teach written, verbal, and visual communication and enhance intercultural understanding and global competency. One of the greatest challenges that departments face is delivering this content in an innovative and engaging manner, and without requiring an international experience – something beyond the reach of many students. This article offers solutions via ten practical classroom strategies to enhance students’ global literacy: 1. Start with a geography lesson, 2. Choose your text wisely, 3. Have an international news website as required reading, 4. Show films in and out of class, 5. Invite the United Nations, 6. Find a festival, 7. Visit the supermarket, 8. Assign a National Geographic photo essay, 9. Give students a passport, 10. Make campus connections. Through using these strategies to develop and enhance intercultural and international understanding, new graduates will be better equipped for an increasingly globalized world.

**Keywords:** internationalize, composition, writing, global

### **The Need for Internationalizing the Writing Classroom**

There is no question that over the last two decades, both international experience and international competence in terms of communication and cultural understanding have become of paramount importance and value to the newest generations of undergraduate students. Now more than ever, American employers are looking for these very qualities: almost 40% of American companies surveyed have been unable to pursue international opportunities because they lack ‘internationally competent employees’ (Daniel, Xie, and Kedia, 2014). A report by NAFSA (National Association of Foreign Student Advisors) (2015) noted that “when 95% of consumers live outside of the United States, we cannot afford to ignore this essential aspect of higher education”. The need to both take the U.S. student to the world and bring the world to the U.S. student has led to internationalization efforts across university campuses that have extended down through institutional layers to the departmental and class level.

In English and writing departments, this has translated as a concerted effort by some to bring a global flavor to many courses, and often primarily to first year writing classes. While on the surface this seems like a reasonable goal, achievable, as Schaub (2003) put it, by “expanding writing assignments to encompass international interests and themes and revising syllabi to reflect a more global perspective” (p. 86), in reality, it presents no inconsiderable charge. As Matsuda and Silva (1999) argued:

Writing teachers and writing program administrators are facing, among many others, two important challenges. The first is to provide an appropriate environment for all types of students, as the student population at many university campuses is becoming increasingly diverse and international . . . the second challenge is to provide educational opportunities in which students can prepare themselves for an increasingly internationalized world. (p. 15)

Matsuda and Silva have articulated an important point: the difficulties inherent in internationalizing the composition classroom lie both in the internal dynamics of the class *and* in bringing with world into that classroom in a way that is meaningful and educational to every student in the class.

While writing classrooms may be oversubscribed and in constant flux due to changing enrollments and the uncertainty that accompanies adjunct faculty, in terms of their reach and impact, they are uniquely positioned to address the need for internationalization. Miller-Cochran (2006) has noted, indeed, the increasingly international nature of writing classes: “recent research in the field of second language writing has highlighted the growing amount of linguistic diversity in college composition classrooms” (p. 20). Our classrooms are *already* multicultural and international in terms of our students; adding further global elements plays upon these pre-existing strengths. The key to enhancing intercultural understanding and global competency is through effective communication, and English departments and their writing classrooms have long been in the business of teaching written, verbal, and visual communication. Thus, the building blocks for a successful international experience are already within the writing classroom.

Although his focus was primarily on literature, Dasenbrock (1987) was correct when he wrote “English is a world language and a world literary language; English departments can therefore introduce students to the world” (p. 58). Indeed, embracing a global composition outlook by integrating international experiences in the first year writing classroom provides a key opportunity for building global competency on campus where the vast majority of students earn their credits. According to the most recent report by NAFSA (2015), only 1.5% of American undergraduates and 10% of American graduate students studied abroad for credit

in the 2013-2014 academic year. These numbers make it clear that many students face challenges in finding opportunities to participate in an Alternative Spring Break trip abroad or in a Study Abroad program. In their intelligence brief on domestic students' experiences of internationalization, Lambert and Usher observed:

Students who do not have definite plans to study abroad have a variety of reasons for choosing to stay at home, with concerns about affordability being an issue for over half of these students. Nearly half (47%) of respondents in this group felt that time spent abroad would be too disruptive to their studies or lead to trouble in transferring credits to their home institution. (p.14)

Given this state of affairs, it is imperative that every writing classroom leverages their access to every first year student and uses the resources at their disposal to infuse curricula and syllabi with meaningful and innovative assignments designed to give students the ability to write the world. As this paper will demonstrate, even in the face of stretched budgets, overcrowded classrooms, and personal, departmental, and institutional challenges, myriad opportunities exist to create significant and valuable international experiences both within and without the college composition classroom.

### **How to Internationalize a Writing Curriculum**

It is important to remember that simply reading and writing *about* the world is not enough. Matsuda and Matsuda (2011) argued: “writing courses, situated as they are in local institutions and rhetorical contexts, need to prepare writers for global writing situations” (p. 172), and that “written communication often entails communicating across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries” (p. 173). Today’s new graduates are more likely than ever to be working in a global professional environment, whether they remain at home or move abroad. They will be dealing with international clients and customers, writing to global audiences, and communicating across both local and international cultural barriers and borders. Now, more than ever before, new graduates find themselves in critical need of cultural awareness and understanding.

There are significant challenges with these lofty goals, however: writing instructors have been trained in writing, not in international relations or global politics. In addition to having little experience in bringing the world into their classrooms, they may have had little personal opportunity to send time abroad themselves. Miller-Cochran (2006) observed that “teaching the curriculum itself helps faculty develop their own awareness of the similarities and differences across cultural contexts for writing” (p. 26-27), but faculty may feel uncomfortable introducing international content if they do not feel particularly well informed.

Even if they have had the opportunity to travel, they likely have had no pedagogical training as part of that experience. A single-country experience, while a wonderful opportunity, also brings a single country narrative to the classroom, not the multiple voices that many curricula are in need of. This lack of knowledge or comfort on the part of the instructor will affect the classroom to a degree and as Matsuda and Matsuda (2011) have observed, “It is even conceivable that many novice teachers – and we surmise many experienced teachers as well – learn about international issues primarily from the textbooks they use in their classrooms” (p. 174).

In addition to encouraging a sound global knowledge base for faculty, it is important that the content is taught in an engaging and innovative manner, and that students can see and understand the connections between themselves and others around the globe. Khadka (2012) explained:

a global composition outlook – one that encompasses a series of actions and practices like pluralizing academic writing, accepting and acknowledging cultural, rhetorical and stylistic variations in all forms of expression/communication, including in our students’ composition, and treating English variants or varieties (if not the native tongues of our students) fairly and equitably in formal as well as informal writing – can take us toward making our composition classrooms and pedagogies more democratic, pragmatic, and relevant to our students as well as to the complex world they are already a part of or will be upon their graduation. (p. 23)

The practical strategies that follow are designed to enhance global literacy for both faculty and students, both inside and outside the classroom. They consider everything from text-selection to field trips, and discuss methods of incorporating multi-media into the classroom, as well as giving suggestions for writing assignments: in the absence of a real-world international experience, they will serve our students well.

### **1. Start with a Geography Lesson**

One of the most striking things with today’s high school graduates is often how vague a grasp they have of international geography and how unaware they sometimes are of major global issues. In tandem with this, a major development in higher education is the increasingly multi-national and multi-ethnic composition of undergraduate classrooms. As Matsuda (2006) noted in his discussion of the myth of ‘linguistic homogeneity,’ “the dominant discourse of U.S. college composition not only has accepted English Only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English-only, in which students are native English speakers by default” (p. 637). It is important to avoid making assumptions about how much students know, where they are from, and which languages they may speak, and instead treat the first class

of an internationally themed composition course as a World Geography 101 refresher. It is helpful to use a large-scale world map for this activity. Allowing students to get hands-on and up close also enhances the dynamism of the class.

The class can begin with labeling exercises, so that students can place the countries that will be covered in class on the map. At this stage, it may be important to consider covering the continents, major world capitals and heritage sites, United Nations offices, and places that have recently been in the news for various reasons. This can broaden into a discussion of countries students already have connections to, those they have visited and those they would like to visit. Although some students may never have had the opportunity to leave the country, and some, indeed, may never have travelled outside the state in which they live, they will all have a few places that they would like to see if given the opportunity. Considering the multi-national nature of the undergraduate body, there are also likely to be international students in the classroom, as well as some with foreign heritage and even family that live abroad; the United States is a true cultural melting pot in this sense. This kind of loose class discussion will facilitate student' sharing of their family histories and stories from their own experiences as travelers.

One of the most interesting assignments that can merge with this world map activity is connected to passports. Start by asking how many students have a passport. This leads into a discussion of where the passport is from and/or where they have gone with their passport. As a writing prompt, ask where students would choose to travel if they were given \$5000 and a passport. Many of them will already have countries in mind, for personal, family, or cultural reasons. Allow them some time to do a little quick research using their devices, and then they can write a short in-class reflection about where they would choose to go and why. This assignment also works well as a more sophisticated, research-oriented essay in which students give an overview of the country and discuss what makes it a worthwhile destination in their eyes. Anecdotal evidence from the author's own composition course revealed that students find this activity both engaging and illuminating, as they look beyond the tourist view of a nation and delve more deeply into its history and culture.

## **2. Choose Your Text Wisely**

Before students have set foot in the classroom and looked at the world map, however, a text will have been chosen for the course. This is one of the most challenging aspects of creating a new course and often provides the scaffolding for the entire syllabus, so it is essential that it is a considered choice. Donahue (2009) has taken the approach that many first year writing faculty also do: internationalization can occur through the reading of texts about

internationalization, globalization, and the local and global effects of these movements, but Miller-Cochran (2006), however, notes that “few textbooks address language diversity and cultural analysis as part of first-year composition” (p. 24). Many textbooks within composition and rhetoric claim to have an international perspective, but a closer examination reveals that many of these so-called international readings are approached in an Amero-centric fashion, projecting Western values and cultural mores onto cultures. As Donahue (2009) has observed, internationalization “shows up thematically in our attention to multiculturalism through the literary and expository authors we introduce or even more explicitly when we do readings with students about internationalization, globalization, and their effects” (p. 216-17) It is essential that internationalization is the focal point of any text, rather than an added benefit that may or may not be present.

There are some great text offerings available, but in order to avoid an Amero-centric perspective on the world and to move toward a more authentically global classroom, look for readings by authors with international backgrounds, by writers who live outside the United States, and for articles from foreign journalists within these texts. Matsuda and Matsuda (2011) have explained that “the incorporation of [global and international] issues is accomplished most substantially by dispersing them throughout the textbook” (p. 179). Avoid visuals that just skim the surface of a country, and give a simplistic interpretation of a culture. An example of the kind of images to avoid might be one of a Middle-Eastern woman wearing a burka if that image is supposed to be truly representative of Middle Eastern culture and the place of women within it. As Markel (2007) noted in a textbook designed for technical writing, “sometimes people in the United States incorrectly assume that their own cultural values are shared by everyone, [but] cultural differences are many and subtle. Learn as much as you can about your readers and about their culture and outlook” (p. 329).

One of the most successful strategies for ensuring that the global content of the course is truly global and represents real world perspectives and complexity is to avoid textbooks altogether. In addition to using a good first-year writing handbook that covers research and documentation well, a collection of readings about current events can form the basis for the class. These events can be pulled directly from the media and can change depending on what is happening in the world and what the students are interested in. This gives the course great flexibility and allows the instructor to develop a set of assignments that will both cover the Student Learning Outcomes of the course, and work well with different topics. Examples might include an argumentative paper on free speech, a research-based project on recent scientific and technological advances that greatly benefit the

developing world, a cause and effect essay discussing a recent or continuing conflict somewhere in the world, or an environmental challenge that affects the global population.

The first example here – writing an argumentative piece on free speech – worked particularly well in the author’s Spring 2015 Honors Composition class. The massacre of twelve staff members of the French satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo* occurred at the beginning of January, and the class followed the story as it happened using a range of foreign and domestic news websites and explored differing global attitudes to free speech and religious intolerance. This allowed students to use online tools to understand alternative perspectives on the events, and to examine how various cultures and countries interpreted and reacted to the events. The fact that it was happening contemporaneously increased its impact for the students and it became a profound learning experience for them.

### **3. Have an International News Website as Required Reading**

Using web-based material is one of the easiest ways of bringing the world into the classroom, and the third strategy for internationalizing the writing classroom is to assign an international news website as required reading. St. Amant (2002) noted that “by allowing students to access online materials from other cultures or to interact directly with individuals from other cultures, computer classrooms with online access can provide students with a unique cross-cultural educational experience” (p. 289).

For today’s undergraduates, news consumption has changed: social media in all its forms tends to dominate, and news talk shows and satire are extremely popular, to the extent that they have replaced mainstream news outlets such as CNN and NBC for a majority of college-aged readers (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel & Shear, 2016). In the US, all of these sources, even the mainstream purveyors of current affairs, primarily present, however, an Amero-centric viewpoint. It is essential that today’s students are encouraged to move outside their cultural comfort zones, and start to see the United States from the outside, the way the rest of the world sees it. An international news website is key to achieving this perspective.

All of the major foreign news outlets, including the [BBC](#) (British Broadcasting Corporation), [France 24](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#), [Der Spiegel](#), [The Guardian](#), [Latin News](#), [China Daily](#), [Pravda Report](#), and a host of others have websites available in English. These sources are designed primarily for foreign readers of the news of these nations, and give an alternative perspective in every way. It is a fascinating exercise for students to select a news story that has been

grabbing headlines in the United States and to contrast the coverage of American news outlets with those in other parts of the world.

#### **4. Invite the United Nations**

In addition to foreign news outlets, another website that is well worth incorporating into the class because of the insight it provides into global politics and international relations is the [United Nations](#) site. In addition to using this website as a research tool for assignments, it is also an excellent source for illustrating how the world works together (or doesn't) in situations ranging from conflict and humanitarian crises to environmental challenges and political strife. Shifting a class to follow a more geo-political course also addresses the idea that composition is more than the teaching of writing: Matsuda and Matsuda (2011) noted: "U.S. writing specialists, most notably Fred Newton Scott, have argued that one of the most important goals of rhetorical education is to prepare 'citizens' for participation in democracy" (p. 189). They emphasize the social responsibility that comes with teaching composition: "arguing for the integration of global perspectives may seem like a tall order if the goal of writing instruction is considered to be the preparation of 'citizens' in a narrow, nationalistic sense. If, however, we can reimagine students in the writing classroom as citizens of the world, we can settle for no less" (p. 189). It is helpful then for students (and instructors) to start with an overview of this global body, looking into its history, structure, and style of governance. Unless students have been involved in a Model United Nations organization, they are unlikely to understand how the UN works on a daily basis: they know what it is, and they generally have opinions of how good a job it does or doesn't do, but they do not understand the complexity and tension within the Security Council, for example. In gaining this understanding, students begin to see how challenging global politics can be and can understand why certain nations stand together on some issues, and against one another on others.

In addition to researching the United Nations and its roles, students can also develop positions on UN missions or interventions, and role-play or debate these positions in class, as well as write about them in more formal contexts. A tour of the UN is also a great opportunity for in-class visits, both from professors from other departments – perhaps Political Science, Geography, or International Relations, but also from the campus chapter of Model UN, if there is one.

In terms of structured class assignments, one that has worked well in the author's own sections of Composition II, and is also particularly useful for teaching research and documentation skills is based on the [1948 UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#). The Declaration is a list of rights that should be afforded to every human being on the planet, and covers everything from the right to freedom

from torture and unlawful imprisonment to the right to vacation and enjoy cultural pursuits. Students choose a right that they would like to explore in detail, thus giving them a personal investment in the assignment. In researching how this right is enforced or abused in a location of their choice, students build a portfolio of evidence for their case, including verbal and written testimony, news stories and video, photographs, maps, drawings, interviews, and numerical data in the form of graphs and charts. As well as creating a list of these references, students develop an annotated list of their materials, a summary of their findings, a position paper on how the particular right should be enforced. They can even compare and contrast the United States and other countries' interpretations of the right in questions. The possibilities are endless. The great benefit of this exercise, in addition to the global knowledge students gain, is the practice in citing electronic materials of all different types, a skill that will serve students well as they write across the disciplines.

### **5. Show films in and out of class**

The greatest challenge of any globally themed writing course is to bring a tangible sense of reality to the classroom. Although it can never replace the real experience, film can go some way towards helping students feel another culture – its sounds, its colors, its values, and its everyday life. Every nation and every possible interest is represented somewhere in film, and going to the movies retains its enjoyment for every generation. Allowing students to select an international film of their choice means they can explore their own interest in a global context, looking at historical or modern-day events and taking in the language, sights, sounds, and cultures of the nation they have chosen. Film also presents a close look at interpersonal relations and public life in whatever culture it represents, and this is something that is extremely difficult to access from a news website or a written text, no matter how good. As Kehrer, Hunter, and McGlynn (1990) noted, the use of film in cross-cultural composition classrooms can “provide insight into other cultures so students might understand them and respect their integrity” (p. 360).

There are many ways to access foreign film – through film websites, from streaming services such as Netflix, on YouTube, and even from the university or local library. Many different types of assignments can be based on the viewing of the film itself depending on the needs of the class and the interests of the students, and whether the viewing was a collective or individual experience. For a whole-class approach, Yang advised instructors to “use video films ... in class and follow it up with discussion” (p. 115). Film also provides an excellent springboard for timed, in-class writing, with students examining cultural questions based on their movie choice, character development, or visual and aural representation of culture, for example. Alternatively, a longer assignment might involve students choosing a

film based on the assignment they completed for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights assignment, and looking at how that right is represented in film.

## **6. Find a Festival**

Capturing the feel of a culture is something that is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching a globally themed writing course. In addition to film, one of the most enjoyable methods for achieving this is to go outside the classroom. As well as noting how important the text is for student success, Kehrer et al. (1990) observed that what happens outside the classroom can also impact students in positive ways: “Connections with experiences outside the classroom are especially important” (362). They particularly recommend journaling about such connections – an activity that allows students to bring their own lives and experiences with the global into their writing.

Communities nationwide organize celebrations and festivals year round, and it is well worth finding one locally and close enough that students can attend. This offers a great opportunity to experience a certain degree of cultural immersion, if only for a few hours. Students will absorb a feel for the food, music, history, and dress of another culture, and in addition to offering opportunities for class discussion, the trip can also provide material for photographic assignments in the form of photo-essays or audio-visual presentations (even collaborative video projects), and personal reflections on their experiences. While this could be offered as an extra credit opportunity for individuals, moving outside the classroom as a community if the whole class attends also creates a different, more relaxed feel than that of the regular classroom. Students are more likely to be creative in their related assignments, and more analytical and personal in their reflections.

## **7. Visit the Supermarket**

Another field trip can be created around a visit to a local international food market. Food is fundamental to almost all of the world’s cultures, and is used to celebrate milestones and national moments of importance. Most international supermarkets also sell a wide range of products in addition to food, and these can be just as interesting for students, and provide as many talking points as food items, although they may be more expensive. One of the most interesting and realistic aspects of a trip to an international grocery is the fact that supermarkets are truly representative of the day-to-day life of a culture – they sell the very things that people miss when they do not live at home, and this provides unique insight into what different cultures regard as essential. Students can take pictures, purchase interesting snacks, and soak up the experience.

Upon return to the classroom, they can reflect on what they have seen and learned, and can use the web to research the ingredients and recipes for the foods that they have seen. For more formal assignments, students can research and write about the cultural significance of objects or foods that they saw during their trip. As an end-of-semester celebration, the class can also do an international potluck based on dishes from this trip. Before the trip happens, it is a good idea to talk about cultural sensitivity and perhaps even make contact with the store management so that they can be prepared for the visit. Just as with the festival visit, the supermarket trip is likely to give students that feel for and a personal interest in a culture that is sometimes hard to achieve using traditional classroom materials. Moreover, in many cities, international markets are often clustered together, so students may be able to visit several countries' offerings in one trip, or visit a grocer, a clothing store, and a bookstore, for example. Another option well worth exploring is a trip to a religious temple, shrine, or mosque. Given an opportunity to discuss and learn about another faith with members or religious leaders of that faith, students can benefit in many ways.

### **8. Assign a National Geographic photo essay**

As Schaub (2002) argued, “As writing instructors, moreover, we should investigate ways to internationalize our courses and programs, such as expanding writing assignments to encompass international interests and themes and revising syllabi to reflect a more global perspective” (p. 86). It can be challenging to create writing assignments that allow for this. One way students can bring together their experiences and interests in other cultures, or indeed their thoughts on their trips to international festivals and stores is through the creation of a National Geographic style photo-essay. If the opportunity to go outside the class and take photos hasn't arisen, students can use images they find on the web, and this assignment provides a great way to discuss how to cite images.

National Geographic is renowned for its high-quality multi-cultural journalism and phenomenal use of images. Although the [National Geographic](#) website is excellent, students can get a better feel for the kind of assignment they will produce if they can explore physical copies of the magazine. They will notice that many of the articles focus on particular locations or aspects of a single culture, and they can base their research on a country they wish to visit, or that they have experienced through a field trip. In addition to creating a text that examines the cultural importance of their subject, they can also use images, complete with captions, to illustrate their story. It is often useful to have a statistics box and small maps to understand other cultures, and developing these is a worthwhile exercise for students too.

The author has regularly assigned such an essay in Composition I classes, finding that, students create powerful visual texts during this research-heavy assignment. The students use many different forms of media, not just to research their subject, but also to present it. Students also have to think about layout and design much more than on other assignments. Microsoft Word can be used to create a magazine-worthy layout with images and columns, but students may wish to use other software with which they are more comfortable. The assignment also works well using web-based platforms, such as wikis or class blogs. A particularly interesting aspect of this assignment is the range of options students have in terms of subject: from country profiles to cultural oddities. The world really is at their fingertips.

### **9. Give Students a Passport**

Many students in the class may never have had a passport, and the possibility for foreign travel may seem distant. Even so, they can explore the world from their own room to a degree. One way in which an instructor can foster this kind of global exploration is through giving students a virtual (or physical) passport. This kind of assignment or extra-credit opportunity promotes independent research and encourages students to spend more time exploring the world that they can access online while also allowing them to develop their own interests.

Whether they are working on a virtual passport or a physical one, they will complete mini quizzes, worksheets, or mini-reflections for each country they visit through assignment and activities prepared in advance by the instructor. Depending on the focus of the class, the questions or prompts could be general country profile questions or more topic-related. For each country visited, and each activity, students can earn credit – passport stamps as it were. The activity, in addition to encouraging students to research in their downtime, also provides them with a level of international competency and awareness that they can bring to their assignments in class, and may even provide them with the subject matter to longer pieces of work.

### **10. Make Campus Connections**

In creating the internationally focused class, it is often easy to overlook resources that are available on every campus nationwide: people. Most universities have a growing number of international faculty, staff, and students, and many now have international recruitment efforts as well as offices to house international programs and personnel. As Kehrer et al. (1990) have observed “Modern technology through travel and communication brings us figuratively and sometimes literally face-to-face with peoples from other nations” (p. 360). Using modern technology to achieve these face-to-face interactions is wonderful, but it is essential

to remember that they can happen in the physical classroom too. Many universities have international conversation hours or festivals, and international faculty, staff, and students can be invited for classroom visits. These moments provide a great opportunity for cross-campus collaboration and community building, and, most importantly, help students see that the world really is right here on their campus, and that it is continually getting smaller. Seeing the international community already present on campus illustrates how important it is that international borders and barriers are no longer impediments to communication, but one of the things that makes communication really interesting. Creating new connections and enhancing pre-existing connections also allows us as teachers of writing to challenge what Shuck (2006) describes as a “view of the world as essentially monolingual” (p. 68), allowing our students to use their Englishes with other world English speakers.

In conclusion, there are myriad benefits, ranging from the human and the inter-personal to the professional and corporate, to internationalizing writing and composition classrooms and curricula. The ultimate goal of the strategies presented in this paper is that they will allow first year composition students in particular, and writing students of all ages and outlooks, to see the connections between their world(s) and the rest of the world. It is hoped that these classroom and real-world experiences will narrow the gaps between communities, cultures, and countries, while simultaneously equipping students with both an international sensitivity and an ability to communicate across the cultural boundaries that can hinder us all.

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