Clinical Trial Methodology

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Writing the World: Ten Tech(Less) Strategies for
Internationalizing the Writing Classroom
Abstract

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 freshman composition classes, touching almost every undergraduate, first year writing is uniquely positioned to deliver classes that teach written, verbal, and visual communication and enhance inter-cultural 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. These ten strategies offer solutions and 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 inter-cultural and international understanding, new graduates will be better equipped for an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: internationalize, composition, writing, global
There is no question that over the last two decades, both the 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. This emphasis on both taking the U.S. student to the world and bringing 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. Whilst 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 articulate 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. These challenges are made only greater by the recent budgetary hardships that many institutions, both
public and private, have faced since the global financial crisis and the subsequent rounds of budget cuts and decreases in endowments that followed.

Although writing classrooms do tend to be chronically underfunded 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. The key to enhancing inter-cultural 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: the building blocks for a successful international experience are already within the writing classroom. Khadka (2012) noted that:

A global composition outlook – one the 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 out 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)

Given the challenges that many students face in finding opportunities to participate in an Alternative Spring Break trip abroad or in a Study Abroad program, due to costs and commitments that mean they cannot travel, it is imperative that the writing classroom leverages this access to every freshman 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.
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). As this paper will demonstrate, even in the face of reduced budgets, underfunded 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.

It is important to remember that simply reading and writing about the world is not enough. 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. Aside from a lack of funding that affects English departments across the nation to a greater or lesser degree, one of the greatest challenges is equipping faculty with the tools they need. Writing instructors have been trained in writing, not in international relations or global politics; in addition to having little experience in bring the world into their classrooms, they may have had little personal opportunity to send time abroad themselves. Faculty may feel uncomfortable introducing international content if they do not feel particularly well informed, and even if they have had the opportunity to travel, they likely 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 acquiring 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 other around the globe. The practical strategies that
follow are designed to enhance global literacy, 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.

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. It is important to avoid making assumptions about
how much they know, and instead treat the first class of an internationally themed composition
course as a World Geography 101 refresher. It is also helpful to use a large-scale world map for
this activity, and to allow students to get hand-on and close up.

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 that
students have visited and countries 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. Many students also have foreign heritage and perhaps 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 travellers.

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, as there may be foreign students in the class, 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 laptops or phones, and then they can write a short in-class reflection on where they would choose to go and why. The assignment could be developed into a more sophisticated, research-oriented essay in which students give an overview of the country and talk about what makes it a worthwhile travel destination in their eyes.

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) takes 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. Many textbooks within the composition and rhetoric field that claim to have an international perspective also have this view,
but a closer examination reveals that many of these ‘international’ readings are approached in an Amero-centric fashion, projecting Western values and cultural mores onto cultures. Donahue (2009) postulates that “[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” (216-17), but it is essential that this is the focal point of any text, rather than an added benefit that may or may not show up.

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. 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 it is supposed to be representative of the culture and place of women within it.

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 current event 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, but also work well with a number of different topics. Examples might include an argumentative paper on free speech, a research-based project on recent scientific and technological advances that
will have great benefits in 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 – of 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 development of 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 differing 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 made it all the more impactful 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” (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 with younger audiences. All of these sources, even the mainstream purveyors of current affairs, 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 see 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, 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.

Many of these news outlets are also fantastic sources of information about the world that is not necessarily connected to breaking news. The BBC, for example, has a series of succinct country profiles that are very useful for class discussions, and also provides in-depth coverage and analysis of important world events, such as meetings of the G8 and G20, United Nations resolutions, and the elections of world leaders.

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 the website as a research tool for assignments, it is also a lovely 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.
It is helpful 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 not likely 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 writing 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 formal class assignments, one that is 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 can 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 can 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 greatest benefit of this exercise, in addition to the global knowledge students will gain, is the practice in citing electronic materials of all different types, as 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, 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. In allowing students to select an international film of their choice 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 inter-personal 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.

There are many ways to access foreign film – through film websites, and 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. Film 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 examples, in timed environments. Alternatively, one example of 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 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), particularly, they argue in the context of journaling – 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. Although this could be offered as an extra-credit opportunity, if the whole class attends, it 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 also personal reflections on their experiences. Moving outside the classroom as a community 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 essentials. 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 significant 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 know what is going when twenty-five students appear out of nowhere. Just as with the festival visit, the supermarket trip is likely to give students that ‘feel’ and a personal interest for a culture that is sometimes hard to achieve using traditional classroom materials. Something that is important to remember is the fact that international markets are often clustered together, so students may be able to visit several ‘countries’ 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. With 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” (86). It can be challenging thinking of writing assignment that allow for this. One of the ways in which 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 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 the 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 worthy exercise for students too.

Depending on the time available, student can create a powerful visual text during this research-heavy assignment. They will be using different forms of media, not just to research their subject, but also to present it. Much more than other assignments, students will also have to think about layout and design; Microsoft Word can be used to create a magazine-worthy layout with images and columns, but students may wish to use other software that they are more comfortable with. The assignment could also be web-based, using a wiki or blog platform for the class. The most 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’ and these will have to be 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 down time, 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” (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, and that it is continually getting smaller. Seeing the international community that is 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.

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 freshman 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 go way to narrow the gaps that exist 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.
References


