Integrating Cultural Awareness Into Curriculum for the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

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Q&A What was the problem you identified in your community?

Evansville, Indiana, is a mid-sized midwestern city that has a growing focus on culturally diverse activities and opportunities, but still has a long way to go before achieving the diversity of its larger surrounding cities. I have noticed a general lack of knowledge and awareness of foreign countries and cultures from many of the students I work with. Even at the college level, a simple knowledge base of foreign geography, religion, and language seems to be too often missing. My assumption has been that cultural awareness is lacking emphasis in the K-12 learning curriculum, and my overall goal has been to find easily achievable ways to infuse a cultural focus into the current curriculum for the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation.

Q&A What did you plan to accomplish at the local level (first six months of the program)?

- I planned to create a task force made up of EVSC administration, local community organizations, and administration and faculty from the University of Southern Indiana (USI). This task force would identify ways to connect to promote culturally focused learning with the youth of Evansville, particularly within the EVSC.

- I planned to create a resource guide of cultural activities already offered by local organizations, and programs these organizations can potentially offer in addition to the regular curriculum for EVSC teachers.

- I planned to create a staff development opportunity for EVSC teachers focusing on the resource guide and training for teaching about cultural studies.

- I planned to work with EVSC to include resources for teachers on existing websites, or create a blog for teachers to share ideas and experiences regarding culturally focused projects and programs.

- Finally, I planned to search for grant opportunities to fund a more elaborate program.

Q&A What did you plan to accomplish at the state level (second six months of the program)?

- I planned to present results of a local-level project to the Indiana Department of Education.

- I planned to create a more formalized training guide for teachers and a resource list to be used statewide.
I planned to share stories and outcomes of students who benefitted from a local project, including a video of a cultural lesson.

I planned to create a contest for Indiana teachers to submit lesson plans, with a prize offered that would add additional resources to the school.

I planned to submit a story to the Indianapolis Star, outlining a project with goals, outcomes, and a personal story.

**Q&A What did you accomplish at the local level?**

I was able to meet with the chief diversity officer of the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation to present my ideas and devise a plan of action. She was able to give approval for the resource guide project and was helpful in finding ways to include the guide in the teacher’s portal on the EVSC website. She also gave helpful advice on which schools within the district are at appropriate stages to collaborate.

I created a resource guide with the help of a USI student intern in education and graphic design. The guide includes information about culturally diverse activities, as well as opportunities for collaboration with local multicultural or diversity-focused organizations.

Also, I created “Traveling Trunks,” focused on Indonesia, El Salvador, and Cambodia. Materials included books, games, photos, PowerPoint presentations, online applications, craft projects, etc. Each has a lesson plan which highlights a state standard. I utilized the help of three international students studying in the U.S. through a Department of State grant who are also education majors and are required to do community service.

I am currently in the process of collaborating with the Multicultural Center here at USI to create more trunks, focused on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and possibly Ghana.

Additionally, I presented a lesson on the three trunks to a local elementary school’s after-school program, which is funded by the 21st century grant, which is federally funded and provided to schools located in areas of poverty.

**Q&A What did you accomplish at the state level?**

I am still working toward my state-level goals, which include meeting with the Indiana Department of Education’s International Education Department1 to present the idea of creating a state-wide Traveling Trunks program, similar to one currently used in other states. I am also waiting on responses to inquiries to state newspapers on running an article on our Traveling Trunks program.

**Q&A Who are three people you met, that you didn’t know before, who were able to help you with your project?**

- Jessica Roos, an education student who studied abroad in Finland and Ghana. She was able to provide expertise in curriculum planning and state standards, and played a large role in guiding the

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1This department does not exist anymore. In its stead, I’ve been referred to the World Languages and Cultures Community. In this online community, I can share lesson plans and information on the Traveling Trunks program to give ideas to teachers across the state.
Traveling Trunks program and helping develop the resource guide. She also had strong connections to the after school programs we utilized in testing out our Traveling Trunks lesson plans.

- Dionne Blue, the chief diversity officer for EVSC who helped me identify the needs of the school system and the appropriate measures of collaboration.
- Dana Roth, USI professor of teacher education and member of the Committee to Promote Respect in Schools (CYPRESS), helped guide the process of creating the Traveling Trunks program, including many important logistical details.

Q&A What were two roadblocks you encountered and tips for overcoming those roadblocks (based on your experience)?

A major roadblock for my project was staff turnover and reorganization. As soon as my project began, our College of Education was dissolved and the teacher education program relocated to another college. The assistant dean of the College of Education, with whom I had been collaborating, left USI. Many of the key stakeholders I identified at EVSC also moved on and took positions elsewhere. With such transitions happening at both places, it was difficult to ask others to take time to focus on my project. Persistence was the key to getting over this barrier. When one connection failed, I tried another, until I finally reached a point where one connection led to another and I had a network of individuals ready to help.

A second roadblock has been having an extremely busy schedule and trying to collaborate with others with equally busy schedules. Resources for education in the State of Indiana and most other states are quite limited and one of those limited resources is time. When educators are worn thin with basic job functions, it is difficult to ask for more, even if the topic is very important. This is why I strived to come up with solutions that made sense for me, such as using resources already available. I worked with students studying with the Global UGRAD program who are required to complete community service. I targeted schools which already had after-school programming in place so an entirely new process wouldn’t have to be set up. In working around my own busy work schedule and the busyness of having two small children I had to be reasonable in my goals and celebrate small successes. It also was tremendously helpful to have the assistance of a student intern who reminded me when it was time to take the next step in the project.

Q&A What one piece of advice would you give to someone who is interested in taking on this issue in their community?

Do not assume you know what your community needs, but instead become a partner in investigating what programs already exist and ways that teaching cultural awareness can be enhanced. Connections are very important. Elicit help from community members and those on your campus who are already connected to the local school district, including students. Be flexible, and let the project guide your decisions. If one idea fails, continue to think creatively to discover new paths. Gather expertise from others instead of starting from scratch.
**What was the biggest outcome of your year-long project?**

The biggest outcome of my project was making connections within the community and creating opportunities for collaboration. During my project I discovered many different groups both on the USI campus and within the greater community creating unique opportunities to learn about culture. Connecting these groups to each other and to the EVSC was very important in furthering my goals. Other important outcomes I did not anticipate included developing leadership and presentation skills for the students who helped with my project. The students learned about American culture and the structure of our public school system. I also hope that these students will be inspired to teach about cultural diversity, no matter what role they choose. Finally, my hope is that students within the EVSC with whom we became involved learned something about cultural diversity, and gained a spark of interest to search for opportunities to explore topics that are new and different.

**What’s next for you, with regard to the work you’ve started?**

I have plans to extend our international student ambassador program by encouraging incoming and current students to continue to develop various trunks. I plan to strengthen relationships with local schools and provide continuing opportunities for collaboration. I am also in the process of collaborating with other offices on campus to develop additional trunks through funding provided by our Office of Alumni and Volunteer Services. I plan to continue to look for opportunities to strengthen connections between the campus community, the local community, and the local school system.

**Read More**

“Connections to Achieve Change for a Global Community,” by Andrea Barnard

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

http://www.connectingourworld.org/files/Grassroots_Leadership_A_Barnard_add.pdf