



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## CONVERSATIONS WITH CANADIANS

Our campus, like campuses across North America, is faced with numerous challenges and opportunities associated with increased enrollment of international students. Learning to relate to other cultures is essential for today's students for social, political and economic reasons, yet some research suggests that many campuses take the view that learning about North American culture is the responsibility of the international student.

During our Professional Development days in spring 2012, our faculty dealt with issues of multiculturalism in the classroom. An over-arching theme was that everyone wanted to see the "internationalization" of our campus. Unfortunately, Canadian students have little motivation to reach out to international students, and international students typically cluster amongst themselves.

The idea for "Conversations with Canadians (CWC)" came to me during those sessions. I teach a Cultural Awareness class, and decided that there must be an opportunity for some "internationalization" through that class. Our campus is an excellent resource for Canadian students learning about other cultures, and synergistically, an opportunity for international students to learn about Canadian culture and the English language.

### The Goal

My goal was to develop an assignment where the responsibility to develop cultural awareness is shared by international and Canadian students equally. I approached our ESL department and began working with them to develop an assignment that would work for both programs. Most students who study abroad are looking for more than education, they want to have new cultural experiences. Our hope is that this assignment would help them meet that goal.

In my Cultural Awareness class in fall 2012, students were given an assignment that included meeting weekly with a student from another culture/country. Near the beginning of the semester, Canadian students in the course were paired with international students in groups of two or three. ESL students were offered the opportunity to volunteer for this project of meeting for

an hour per week in exchange for being allowed to skip a weekly "conversational" class.

The weekly meetings allowed international students an opportunity to learn about Canadian culture, while improving their conversational English. In addition, Canadian students were able to discover other cultures while building relationships with international students. Further, by sharing Canadian culture, our students were learning to define their own culture. Following each meeting, students were required to complete a short journal entry about their meeting.

### The Outcomes

The assignment was quite a success for both Canadian and international students. The vast majority of the comments from both were positive. Friendships developed well beyond the assignment and included potluck meals and other social events. Several students spent Thanksgiving with their international friends, introducing them to Canadian culture. One student took a group of Asian students on their first "trick-or-treating" experience.

One international student, when asked about our celebrations said, *"I didn't want to admit I didn't understand, but people are really kind. They explain to me. It is a different culture; it makes me see things in a different view."*

From the standpoint of Canadian students, developing these international friendships was generally considered to be an excellent experience. One unexpected outcome was that my Canadian students' writing improved drastically because I corrected their journal writings weekly. Overall, learning about other cultures first hand proved valuable for our Canadian students.

The ESL students were able to have regular conversations with Canadians, which resulted in an improved understanding of English. There were three positive outcomes for the ESL students:

- Students brought what they had learned back into the classroom and shared new elements of Canadian culture with one another.
- Students' confidence in their own capacity with English grew, which opened doors for them to experience more. Typically, international students have difficulty exploring the community or the

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country because of the language barrier. However, the program gave them improved confidence and, therefore, a willingness to explore. This resulted in students travelling on the weekends to other locations around Alberta.

- Many of the nuances of the English language are difficult to teach in the classroom. ESL students were given an excellent opportunity to learn the vernacular of English-speaking college students through the CWC program.

Feedback from the ESL students was also largely positive. Shortly after the program began, and the student grapevine began to work, a number of ESL students who had not volunteered originally asked if they could join the program.

### Looking Ahead

Educational success would be difficult to measure at Medicine Hat College, as many of our ESL students are here only for one term to learn English. However, this project could be adopted in order to enhance student-learning, and perhaps in situations where ESL students are attending with the goal of pursuing further education at the institution, could be used to study educational success.

During fall 2013 and beyond, our intent is to use the assignment in a research project related to student satisfaction. It is our belief that international students will have a greater level of satisfaction in their educational experience if they develop relationships with Canadian students.

Using a proven tool from research done for the Canadian Council on Learning (Fisher & Engemann, 2009), we will assess students' perception of the campus after their first week, and compare those results with student perceptions following the *Conversations with Canadians* project. In addition, we will use focus groups to assess student satisfaction with the project itself.

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