Fostering International Student Success in Higher Education

NOVEMBER 19, 2014  
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It seems appropriate that since my part-time job has turned into a work-full-time-but-get-paid-for-half-time job this fall, I should tell you about one of the books I’ve read for work. I know it’s terrible how I’ve been letting work cut into my time for writing about books. I’ve been trying to post at least once a week and I have hopes of re-establishing a better part-time-work/life balance in the future, but any mother of two college students thinks twice before backing off from paying work.

I heard about Fostering International Student Success in Higher Education because one of the authors, Shawna Shapiro, participates in discussions on my e-mail list for selective liberal arts college writing program administrators. When I heard about the book, I asked her for a copy, and she obliged, even though I told her that the most likely venue for a review was here.

My small college has an increasing number of international students (77 out of about 1,600), so part of my job is to give the students—peer editors—who work for me guidance on how to provide the kind of specialized writing help the international students need. We had a staff meeting today, and I handed out copies of two pages from the book, one a discussion of the “dialogic approach” that we take in the Writing Center (because peer editors should be engaging in dialogue with writers rather than telling them what to do) and another a chart showing the ten most common grammatical issues in the work of second-language writers, in order of “severity” or how much they interfere with a reader’s understanding. I found those two pages to be the most specific about what to do in order to give the most help to international students on their writing.

Because, as the book points out, a U.S. student’s cultural frame of reference can be very different from an international student’s, I arranged for two students come to the staff meeting and talk about a few of the cultural expectations they’ve faced. The Nigerian student pointed out that citation is more important in the U.S. than in her home country because we have free access to more sources, and the Palestinian student admitted that he was so overwhelmed with information about intellectual ownership and how to avoid plagiarism (or what the book calls “unconventional source use”) when he first came to college that he had nightmares about it.
One of the interesting things about the chapter entitled “The Role of Culture,” by the way, is that it introduces the subject by way of a metaphor which has a very specific place in Kenyon culture, since David Foster Wallace used it in his “This is Water” commencement speech (http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf) in 2005. This is the metaphor: “A frog sitting on the bank of a river sees a fish swim by and asks ‘How’s the water?’ The fish looks up and replies, ‘What water?’” When you’re submerged in it, you’re not aware of it.

The two students at my meeting mentioned cultural issues that the book brings up, such as “arriving to class on time, keeping oral presentations short and succinct, and being concise in written work.” In particular, being expected to present the main idea at the beginning of an academic paper was a stumbling block for the Palestinian student early in his U.S. academic career, as he remembers being told he had to explain more up front and thinking “what, are they stupid?”

We talked about learning strategies for writing by English language learners, mostly those identified in the book as “‘metacognition,’ or awareness of one’s own thinking and learning” and about “self-mediation,” which can be like talking to yourself or can be prompted by someone else’s questions in a writing center (for instance, asking “how do you know that?”).

The Nigerian student mentioned how helpful rubrics have been to her, and to her friends from other countries; the book has a section on rubrics, with guidelines for creating and using them.

Although the book is addressed primarily to instructors, I found it useful for organizing some of the issues for the students who work for me, those who are often on the front lines of international student education. Like all books of its kind, the more specific it gets, the more helpful it can be. That the specific is most helpful, of course, also applies to the broad category of “international students.” As a student from Cameroon once said to Ron, gratified that he could name a specific city in that country, “some Americans think all of Africa is one small village.” What works for a student from Nigeria may not work as well for another from Beijing. I think working in the writing center, however, is an advantage, since most of the discussion takes place one-on-one and can therefore be tailored to an individual.

The specifics mean little without a general overview, however, and this book provides that. I thank Shawna especially for sending it to as general a reader as me to share with even more general readers like you. That’s why, despite the aggravations, I work at a liberal arts college—I like trying to learn (and pass on) a little bit about everything.

What did you learn today?
I’m encountering some similar issues with overseas toymakers, particularly the issues of writing and citation style and am learning that I need to explain things I take for granted with American toymakers. Maybe I should read this.

REPLY

Jeanne  PERMALINK*

November 20, 2014 9:50 am

Well, this book is necessarily general. It raises the question of whether the cultural frame of reference for someone overseas can be so different as to throw up roadblocks in communication, but it can’t answer that question for every situation. It sounds to me like it might be worth writing a brief guide for overseas toymakers, one that can be edited or expanded to fit. (I could give that a try. Like anything you get for free, it’s worth the price, right?)

REPLY

2. edj3  PERMALINK

November 20, 2014 10:04 am

I ran into this about 10 years ago, managing a program where my company trained Chinese network engineers how to make a network like my company’s. Their education/training model is quite different from what we generally follow here in the States.

Here, the instructor is usually highly skilled at delivering training, and will know how to facilitate training for adult learners. They may secondarily have some background in the subject matter but are almost never experts in it. In China, all instructors are subject matter experts. So the Chinese nationals who were here for training struggled with the instructors’ apparent ignorance while the instructors struggled with their attitudes of blatant disrespect. The whole situation took some careful negotiations to keep things on track.

REPLY