

## CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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When teaching abroad, culture is unavoidable in the classroom. I notice it in the behavior of my students, their expectations of a teacher (which I am still learning), and their approach to working. What learning styles students have traditional been taught in, what approaches to learning or classroom activities are new for them; all these are concepts I am still in the process of acquiring. In the same regards, so too are students trying to learn from their “exotic” teacher.

When you teach within an alien culture from one’s own, you enter with many pre-packaged assumptions: you know (generally) what to expect from students and what they expect from you. As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine, I largely know nothing in that regards. My students and I are like two entities stumbling around in a cave, trying to meet in the middle of the darkness. As we stumble around, we get closer to one another over time. I know far more now than I did even two months ago, but in the words of the American poet Robert Frost: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have miles to go and promises to keep.”

Having a monoculture class presents additional challenges from the mixed culture refugee classes I taught in the United States and Canada. When my students converse in Ukrainian or Russian, what are they saying exactly? Are they discussing their weekend, a business concept or grammar point, or how they cannot understand a word I am saying? Am I doing something culturally bizarre—acting in a manner not becoming of a teacher? I mean this largely in jest, but I find myself wondering how different I may be in techniques and manner from a “native” teacher.

The real question of course is who is the “teacher?” My students have taught me far more about Ukraine than any tourist guide could about their culture. As a “green” teacher,” a beginner in my field, I am in the process of an ongoing experimentation. In this experiment, the classroom is my laboratory. I have the opportunity to test concepts and activities, to see which approaches to learning bear fruit and which other ones are lacking. My students patiently guide me with their responses, and from the initiatives and corresponding feedback, we stumble closer in the cave.

The gulf between the American mindset and the Ukrainian mindset is quite large—far larger than I expected when I was still preparing for my odyssey in my home state of Arkansas. I encounter this gulf every time I step into the classroom. It seemed at the beginning that the gulf was more of a small crevice, than widened as the months went by in Ukraine, and now it has stopped (or at least slowed down)...I can see the other side.

When I enter my university, I know I must leave my conception of “time;” my sense of preparing for the future, and live in the moment of “now.” At anytime, something could and probably will change. I know to take nothing for granted as I would in America. My students say “we” and I say “I.”

As I teach, I am teaching more than just English--I am teaching America. As time progresses though, I am ceasing to become a monolithic symbol of the United States and hopefully revealing myself more as a person—Joseph G. Bailey. In the same sense, the initial “Soviet Block” that was my students is unraveling and revealing unique individuals.

This is voyage of self-discovery for myself, both as a person and as a teacher. As I interact with my students, I am learning more about myself, my culture, and my conceptions or views of life. In many ways, I must deconstruct what I was taught in order to reconstruct how to teach English. In many ways, my education is truly just beginning. I see that what makes sense in theory does not always work so well in practice.

The road has been bumpy, but there are fewer potholes as we continue on our semester journey. Teacher and students must be patient with one another, understanding that initial expectations will probably be unrealistic. It is not unlike two dancers meeting for the first time. As one can imagine in such a situation, dancing will be awkward and clumsy at first, but as each dancer gets to know the other’s patterns, they can move in unison. Over time however, the coordination and motion improves as our two dancers work together to improve their dance.