DRAFT VERSION

Please write to the following email with any questions or comments:

studentsforstudents.uschina@gmail.com

Supporting

International Inquiry, Holistic Language Development and Student Engagement in Real Time Learning Environments Online

With Teaching Strategies for:

Building Personalized, Meaningful and Fun Learning Groups Online

Supporting Students' International Curiosity, Inquiry and Understanding

Supporting Students' Holistic Language Development and Interdisciplinary Learning

Teaching, Unit Design and Writing by:

Devon Wilson, Codi Caton, Tanya Kant, Sarah Koehler and Maxwell Smith

October 2020

Chapter 4
Developing A Collaborative Culture for ESL Learners

Written by Max Smith

Teaching high school students full-time for several years, I see the direct relationship between a strong classroom culture and student outcomes on a daily basis. When I joined S4S, one thing I wondered was how my classroom culture building routines would translate to a virtual setting and to students who are learning English as a second language. I have found that creating consistent routines that build and reinforce a welcoming, supportive, hard-working, and risk-taking classroom enhance students' interactions with each other, develop their in-class presentations, and strengthen their mindsets about themselves as English language speakers and learners. Supporting our efforts to build collaborative and personal online learning communities, all teachers in the S4S program are encouraged to develop the personalized classroom cultures that match their teaching styles and goals with their students'. In this chapter, I share what this looks like for the International Inquiry Units I facilitate. They are organized based on when I typically employ them using the sequence below:

- Opening unit routines
- Daily routines & practices
- Closing unit routines

Opening Unit Routines

Initial Correspondence

The teacher's opportunity to make or break a classroom culture through their initial classroom actions cannot be understated. For S4S, this starts with our introduction, a written correspondence to our class where we prepare them for our first meeting. Our founder, Devon Wilson, provides the first connection by creating a WeChat group where the students in our inquiry group are connected to the instructor. Then it is up to me to set the tone for the course. In my initial correspondence, there are a couple of culture building moves I make right off the bat.

The first is referring to my class as a "team." I do this to de-center power and redefine my role as a "more experienced learner" rather than the keeper of knowledge. I reinforce this with "collaborative and we"based language by using words like "alongside" and "together" to build an expectation that students will be as integral to the progress and direction of the course as I am.

The second is prepping students for a show-and-tell where they find an artifact that gives us a window into who they are. Grounded in Ryan and Deci's theory of relatedness, I ask students to come prepared with an artifact (picture, memento, etc.) that does one of the following:

- Represents a time where they felt they belonged
- Illustrates a moment in the past where they felt most like themselves
- Shows us a place or experience of which they loved being a part

As I will share in the next section, priming students with this artifact opens up the conversation for deeper connections than a cursory "what is your name and where are you from?" introduction to class.

While the initial correspondence may seem like such a minute part of class, for me it truly sets the tone for the type of relationship I plan to build with my students and the ways we will engage with each other in our learning. It confers a sharing of power and a co-construction of knowledge. Particularly within an online learning setting, this provides the opportunity for me to set the tone for our class similarly to how I do this in person over the course of the first few moments in the classroom. Below is an example of a typical introduction I provide with a new class:

"Hello team! My name is Max Smith, and I'm thrilled to be learning alongside each of you as we read Goodall's *My Life with Chimpanzees.* In this course, we will explore what it means to be an *ethologist* as we practice "slow looking" with nature and animals. For our first class together, please come prepared by reading Chapter 1 (attached). Lastly, take some time to find an artifact (this could be a picture, drawing, personal memento, or something else) that shows us about a time where you felt you were truly coming alive. We will share our artifacts with each other and have time to ask each other questions about them in our first class. If you have any questions before we meet in person, please reach out to me via WeChat. I look forward to kicking off our learning together this Sunday. Until then!"

First Day Introductions

The first day of class is always a little nerve-wracking. No one knows anyone, and we're all wondering what this experience will be like. My focus during this time is to greet each student as they log in and set them at ease by letting them know when we will officially begin. When we do officially begin, we start with introductions. The typical protocol is as follows:

- What is your name?
- Where do you live?
- What artifact did you bring and why?

I go first to model speaking with genuineness. For the first question, I introduce myself as "Mr. Max." The use of the "Mr." connotes my responsibility as the adult in the room who is in charge of my students' safety and learning; however, I pair this with the choice for students to call me by my first name to reinforce the collaborative orientation of our learning environment. I have found that students quite enjoy using the moniker and it builds an initial bridge for them to start releasing the traditional mindset they've been conditioned to assume about what their role is as students.

For the second question, I bust out google maps to pinpoint the city where I live, Atlanta, and have students draw a connection between my city and theirs. I do this to signal to my students that I am willing to take whatever time it takes for us to start getting to know each other more deeply. I will then start sharing some of my proudest reasons for living in Atlanta--that it's Dr. King's birth home and a center for civil rights activism. In modeling all of this, the message I am sharing to my students is that they can be honest and proud of who they are when they share, too.

Before students use the protocol to introduce themselves, I set the expectation that they will each ask one question to each other. I do the same (if not asking multiple questions) and use google to pull up pictures of what students are referencing in their responses. This often sparks additional questions and comments from the students. When a student has finished introducing themself, I prompt students to give a round of applause. It's a simple celebration, and the students love it!

Creating First Day Agreements

At school, working with adults, and in my virtual class with S4S, my priority after introductions is always creating agreements. Over the past decade, I have seen organizations construct and define these in varying ways. "Norms" is a commonly used term. In the past few years, I have seen some organizations shift to the term "Agreements" because the word *norm* can impact what behaviors the group generates by priming us to consider what we believe is "normal" or "societally appropriate" rather than speaking from a place of authenticity around what we actually need from a group in order to feel safe, heard, and that we belong. Even more recently, in my work as an Equity Facilitator Fellow with the Atlanta-based teacher development fellowship CREATE, we use the term "Ethos."

For S4S, creating "agreements" is our first exercise in collaboration and democratic unanimity. I explain that agreements are the ways we will all agree to show up in this shared space together. Agreements answer the question "what do I need in this space in order to feel safe, heard, that I belong, and to take risks with my learning?" To allay any pressure to create perfection, I tell students that we will revisit them at the beginning of class each week to make

sure the things we landed on are actually creating the classroom culture we want, and we can change them at any time. Agreements work best when there are just a handful so that they can be easily committed to memory.

To create agreements, I post the guiding question in the chat and then pull up the whiteboard feature on Zoom to go through an Open-Narrow-Close protocol. In the "Open" step, I encourage students to be generative, and I capture all of their ideas on the whiteboard. In the "Narrow" step, we discuss how the ideas relate to each other. How can they be organized? Can they be condensed? At this point, I tell students we want to narrow our ideas down to 4-6 agreements. In the "Close" step, I formalize each of the agreements, using students' language as much as possible in each of them. I remind students that they're called agreements because they're things we all can agree to uphold in every class. Students give a final lookover, and we finish by all showing that we agree with our thumbs up.

Below, I've included a list of the more commonly used agreements in my virtual classes:

- We try our best
- We respect & support each other
- When we don't know, we ask
- We listen to understand
- We are talkative
- We have fun together
- We come prepared
- We push ourselves to take risks with our learning

1-on-1's

The final opening unit routine in each of my virtual classes is the 1-on-1. I usually schedule these to take place the second week of class. 1-on-1's are a 30 minute time where I meet individually with each of my students. I conduct 1-on-1's to build a stronger relationship with each of my students and to check reality on their experience with class so far. They do not have any pre-work for the meetings. Below is the agenda I use:

- Check-in on student: how are they feeling right now?
- Share the purpose of 1-on-1's
- Ask student what they want to talk about
- Ask student what are their goals for the course?
- Ask student how class is going so far. What is going well? What can be improved? What knowledge and skills are they building? How is the course different from their initial expectations of what it would be?
- Ask student how the course load is going so far (difficulty with text, time it is taking to do homework)
- Remind students of the ways to communicate with me if they need anything outside of class

While I do come with an agenda for our 1 on 1's , it is designed to be flexible to the student and it is mostly for my use as a tool to facilitate our time together if needed rather than a protocol we must follow. Some of my best 1-on-1's got as far as "ask students what they want to talk about" and the rest of the time was filled with conversation about their favorite tv shows, video games, books, or sports. These are moments when I know the 1-on-1 is serving its purpose: they are building command of their conversational English and exhibiting leadership through the topics they share.

The benefits of 1-on-1's are evident right away. For starters, they provide the time for student-teacher relationship building that is already built into the structure of in-person learning by consequence of sharing space together. After our 1-on-1, students come to class with a different energy because we have gotten to know each other outside of the traditional classroom setting, and I leverage that connection to bring it out within our learning space, to further disrupt the conditioning of a traditional students' role in passive learning.

Daily Routines & Practices

After I have set the initial classroom culture through the opening unit routines (introductions, agreements, and 1-on-1's), I use a series of practices every class period to reinforce and build upon the student-led, collaborative learning environment. I think of these as a skeleton for each lesson. While the content and activities vary, these routines provide a familiar container through which students collaborate in sense-making, expressing ideas, and developing our culture for learning.

Opening Activity

Standard pedagogical practice includes some sort of "opening routine." These come in many names and forms such as "Do Nows," "Bell Ringers," "Warm-ups," and "Energizers." The purpose of this time is to activate students' energy and focus it on our purpose for being together. A few of my favorite opening activities are the "Whirl-around," "Connections," and "Mad-libs."

In the "Whirl-around" there is a question of the day, and each student answers the question then sends it to another student to do the same. It's called "whirl-around" because when a student sends the microphone to someone else, they say "I whirl it to..." and do a whirling motion with their hands like it's a wand. This is a great opening activity at the beginning of the year because, in addition to having a fun question of the day, students can re-share their names and become used to talking to each other directly (without waiting for a teacher to prompt them). I usually provide 3 things for students to share in a whirl-around: their names, a quick

fact about themselves (e.g., favorite color, favorite band, dream vacation), and then a question that requires a more in-depth response (e.g., tell the story of how you got a scar, what is the next thing you are saving up for and why?). When students get the hang of this, I push them to provide the quick fact and deeper response questions for us to answer at the beginning of future classes. If no one volunteers, I have everyone write down some ideas for the next minute and then share them aloud. This facilitator move also provides us with future whirl-around questions, and students enjoy getting their question featured in the opening activity or knowing it will be saved to use in an upcoming class.

"Connections" is another great opening activity for the beginning of the course, when we are still getting to know each other. It is very similar to the whirl-around where students will share their name, a quick fact, and something requiring deeper response. The difference is that instead of a student "whirling it" to the next student, the next student to share must find a connection with what the previous student shared. They say "connection" aloud and then explain it before then sharing their answer to the opening activity questions. For example, let's say Tina shares that her favorite color is blue and then shares a story about her favorite summer memory fishing with her father. After she has finished sharing, Dora says "connection" before explaining she has gone fishing before. Next Dora provides an answer to the daily question. This activity can be fun and challenging for students to come up with a connection to each other, and it can spark interesting discussion as students probe for more information until they can find something with which they can connect --especially when there is only one student left who has to make a connection with the previous speaker. The connection making practiced in this process is also used in effort to support the type of thinking we hope students will engage in during International Inquiry Units--making connections between resources, classmates' thinking, and different contexts.

"Madlibs" is based on the popular card game. I tell students to write down two examples of a noun, verb, and adjective. I then show them a Madlib (a short story that has different parts of speech left blank for the reader to fill in). They each read the Madlib using their examples to complete the story. This provides lots of laughter as students hear how nonsensical, unexpected, or wry their inadvertent stories are. If I have a class that loves Madlibs, I will take it to the next level by having them write down adverbs and prepositions. This is a great way to build students' fluency in parts of speech without them even realizing it.

Revisiting Agreements & Setting Intentions

After our opening activity, we are more energized. I funnel this energy into grounding us in today's agenda by asking my students to remind us of our agreements. As students share them aloud, I write them on the whiteboard Zoom feature for all to see. I then ask students if the list

still feels relevant and like it is working for the class or if anyone has ideas to add to or change them. Then we put our thumbs up signaling we agree to uphold each of them for class today.

Sometimes, I leave the routine there. However, if I feel we could benefit from further engagement with our agreements - for example, if I'm sensing they have become trite - I will push students to choose one of our agreements and set an intention for how they will live into that agreement in class today. I use the breakout room feature on Zoom to pair students up and have them share their intentions with their partner. This buddy system creates shared accountability, and I tell them at the end of class they will return to their buddy who will report back to them how they saw the student living into the intention they set. I can be strategic in who I partner up based on relationship building I want to see. When students know they will be reporting back to each other, it redirects their daily attention and engagement toward each other's participation and conversation rather than on me (another quick way I decenter power).

Talk Moves

When I first joined Students For Students, one of the biggest challenges I faced in facilitating virtual learning was eliciting student discourse, especially student-to-student discourse. In the physical classroom, I can use proximity to encourage a student to share with someone next to them, or I can use a talking piece that students can pass to one another.

In the virtual space, there are different challenges the facilitator must pick up on: it can be harder to read the energy in the room, because you're not all breathing the same air; it can be more challenging to have a student respond directly to another student because the virtual setting adds a layer of distance or formality. As I tried out different approaches to encourage student discourse, I have found a few talk moves that I now regularly use.

To encourage their use, I am explicit with them about the purpose of these talk moves to build their confidence and collaboration by responding to each other rather than just to me. I will often connect the talk moves back to our agreements as an extra way to emphasize how everything we do culture-wise is connected and self-reinforcing. The major talk moves I use in my Zoom classroom are "sending it back," "wait time," "passing the baton," "thinking routines," "breakout rooms," and "shout outs."

Sending it Back

"Sending it back" is the most direct way I prompt students to replace the habit of turning to the teacher for the funds of knowledge with turning inwards and to each other. I take a question either explicitly or implicitly directed at me and redirect it to the room. This may sound like: "That's a great question! What do folks in the room think about this?" or "Seven just asked

something really interesting. Let's all take a moment to think about this. I want to hear what some of you think."

Wait Time

Opposite to "sending it back" is silently using "wait time." This is one of my favorites, and I have developed a reputation among my classes for holding it with poise at length. In the beginning of the year, I usually use wait time after sending it back so students understand that I am serious when I expect them to think and share aloud. As the weeks progress and they are more comfortable with the expectation, I skip sending it back altogether and simply respond with my facial features, such as encouraging smiles, nods, and obvious looking at other students for a response with my eyes. When working with younger students or students who are developing English fluency, I am often amazed how wait time can lead to the expansion and deepening of their thinking. For example, there was one class where I used wait time after asking a student a question where it took longer than the natural rhythm of conversation to respond. There was a moment where I could see he was ready to give up, expecting the teacher to move on, but then he snapped back to thinking in the same split second, realizing his voice and thoughts matter and deserve to be heard. At the end of my classes, a common piece of feedback is that the first class where I felt my opinions and ideas mattered. It's the little moments like using wait time with that student that I attribute to this positive student feedback class after class.

Revoicing and Narrating

Falling somewhere in between sending it back and wait time are the classic teacher moves "revoicing and narrating." Sometimes simply repeating what the student says (revoicing) will get students to add onto it. Alternatively, I can describe what the student just said/did (narrating) as a way to show I am actively listening and also expecting another student to respond more directly to the ideas being shared. All of these moves take time for students to adjust to--especially because you are restructuring power and communication--but the agency the talk moves build in students is well worth the learning curve (which may include several awkward silences).

Passing the Baton

"Passing the baton" is one of my students' favorite daily activities because I embrace it as a light-hearted, somewhat corny, but highly effective instructional tool. I tell my students to make a wand motion with their hands and that what they are doing is actually creating our class baton. Whenever they have the baton, they get to share their ideas, and they may also choose to simply hold it for a while. Then, they "pass the baton" by waving their hand like a wand and sending it to another student to continue the conversation. A lot of drama and excitement gets built around the split-second moment of suspense when students do not know who their peer will pass it to. This also keeps the momentum high for the activity at hand.

Thinking Routines

Another instructional tool the staff at S4S incorporates is called "Thinking Routines". These are protocols which push students to activate their attention and thinking in specific ways. There are many benefits to integrating them into our learning experiences: for instance, they are generative, not evaluative, meaning they do not set an expectation of a "right or wrong" answer, but rather open students up to sharing whatever comes to their minds. Secondly, they give students a clear structure, which encourages them to share more than if they were just presented with a question to answer. Lastly, they build in the expectation that all students must participate and share because the nature of the protocols are low-pressure, quick, and fun.

I also consistently use several thinking routines from Project Zero's "Making Thinking Visible," including "Circle of Viewpoints," "Compass Points," and "See-Think-Wonder." I encourage you to check out their full list. Along with these, I have also started to experiment with some of my own. To illustrate how I use these routines, I'll share one that I created called "Wow-Wish-Wonder." Like most of the thinking routines, I use them in ways to get students to respond to each other's work. The work can be anything: an oral presentation, artifact for show-and-tell, written work, etc. After one student presents their work, each student will share a "Wow" (something that struck them with awe), a "Wish" (something they would like to see added or included), and a "Wonder" (something they are left being curious about). Usually one student will volunteer to start, and then we'll "pass the baton" from there until all students have participated. To close the protocol, the student presenter will share their final thoughts and feelings in general after hearing all of the feedback.

An additional feature that can be used during thinking routines is the whiteboard feature on Zoom. Sometimes I will play the role of "scribe" and capture students' feedback on the white board for everyone to see. Alternatively, I may ask if a student wants to volunteer for this role or ask students to write down their "Wow-Wish-Wonder" on the white board as they're sharing. Whiteboards can be saved by taking a screenshot and shared with students afterwards for their reference in future work.

Along with the whiteboard feature, Zoom's breakout rooms are great for promoting student discourse. I use this strategy in both planned and unplanned circumstances. If sending it back to the students is not prompting any dialogue, I may say "all right students, let's discuss this in small groups!" and then send them to breakout rooms and ask for them to report back on what they shared. In general, breakout rooms are very versatile. Consider using them for gathering students' ideas at the beginning of a topic or chapter discussion, for assigning different groups to explore different questions or take different perspectives, or for creating different sides for a debate.

Shout Outs

The last talk move I regularly use in my classes is "shout outs." This lives in two places within the lesson. It can be a nice way to close an activity, round of presentations, or discussion; and it is how we always close our daily classes. When I use it at the end of an activity, I usually tell students to give each other a literal round of applause: we clap our hands in a circle in front of the cameras so everyone can see. Then we may each share something we want to celebrate about another classmate, "pass the baton style" until everyone has given and received one shout out. At the end of class, we do shout outs for everyone. Oftentimes, I will tie the shout outs to ways I observed students practicing deeper learning skills like collaboration, complex problem solving, or deductive reasoning. I will also encourage students to shout each other out for ways they saw each other live into our class agreements. I find that shout outs really boost morale and end the class on a high note. Furthermore, I have seen some of the strongest relationship building occur during shout outs because students are able to explicitly name the connections they have built with each other and celebrate each other's leadership and cooperation.

Closing Unit Rituals

Closing well is just as important as starting well. In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman explains the "Peak and Tail" principle of memory. That is, when an experience is over, the feelings we associate with the entire experience are mostly defined by how we felt during the "peak" or most climactic event and during the "tail" or whatever happened last. His research references long needles injected in patients for shot administrations, but I have found the principle to generally hold true for classes, as well. I keep this principle in mind when creating the culture for my two closing routines: "capstone project exhibitions" and "closing celebrations."

Capstone Project Exhibitions

In our curriculum, S4S has built in culminating tasks. For example, in the unit on environmental sustainability and ethology, students can share a montage of their 9-week observations and diaries of a living creature. In the unit on fairy tales, students may finish by sharing their final draft of their own fairy tale, fable, or folk tale. These are projects we usually have been working on for 3-5 weeks of the course, so there is a lot of investment in exhibiting the final project.

Often, the nature and associations of projects is felt by students as something colossal, and the psychological tax of this can take away any of the joy or intended outcomes for their learning for which the project was intended. Our curriculum intentionally eliminates this burden through bite-size cycles of design and peer feedback. At the end of the unit, students are already very

familiar with each other's work because they have been sharing their ideas and resources with each other for several weeks. This process of chunking the project also allows me to get a gauge on the progress students have made and frame their expectations around what a solid state of the project will look like by the end of our course.

This all leads to an exhibition day that is about celebrating growth and latest iteration rather than looking for perfection of a final version. We typically go through one last thinking routine protocol with students' presentations - but with one twist. I ask students to share out how their thinking has changed since the beginning of the project and how they will apply this changed mindset to their lives in school and at home. For me, the power is not in the final state of their projects but rather in these candid reflections. Their presentation becomes a medium for their thinking, and their capstone projects are simply another artifact they can use as evidence of their growth.

Closing Celebrations

By far, one of my favorite parts of class is the closing celebrations ritual. This is purely a time of spreading love and gratitude for each other and the growth we have made as a class. From a logistical standpoint, I'll block out 15-20 minutes at the end for this activity, so everyone has the time to share without feeling rushed.

On our final class, after everyone has shared their last presentations, I give a quick narrative "look back" at everything we have done. Then, we go around and each say our closing gratitudes to every other student in the class. I usually start to set the tone of meaningful praise and warmth, highlighting different stories of how I have seen students build their confidence, their writing, and their leadership. Then, each student gets the floor to share their gratitudes and moments of pride with and for each other. The things students have shared during this ritual are truly heart-warming. I have had students share their plans to visit each other's families, take another class together, and even call each other "life long friends." These are the moments we educators live for.

A Final Note - The Impact of Culture on the Classroom for Students and Teachers

Utilizing the opening unit, daily, and closing unit routines in this chapter has helped in tailoring the experience to the different student groups I've worked with and foster a culture of collaboration. Just as in physical classrooms, the routines and moments we take for culture building move our class from feeling like a sterile group of strangers to a team who feel empowered to learn and can enjoy and appreciate this shared experience together.

As the teacher, being intentional about creating an affirming classroom culture is just as beneficial for me. It moves my role beyond the traditional archetype of knowledge arbiter. It also makes the experiences meaningful. I can be reviewing the same curriculum, but because there are new students and we are creating our own classroom culture together, I get a new experience and takeaways from the content and pedagogy. This is what keeps me returning to the work as an educator with a renewed pride and passion every time.