

DRAFT VERSION

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## **Chapter 1**

# **Exploring the Context of Online Learning for ESL Students: Why Small Group Interactive Learning Models? Why International Inquiries?**

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### **The Context of Online Learning Amid Covid-19:**

Within the span of a few months in 2020, online teaching went from something that a relatively small percentage of educators had taken part in, to a form of education that suddenly a majority of teachers and schools across the planet had to consider and implement. In talking with educators and students from around the world in early 2020, it quickly became apparent that teachers struggled to adapt to leading meaningful learning experiences through real-time online platforms, and students struggled in many instances where schools tried to force fit their standard lecture format into an online space. After-school programs came into 2020 with a longer history of designing online learning programs, yet engagement remains a challenge with a majority of students and teachers preferring in-person learning experiences.

### **Introducing the Students for Students (SFS) Program**

Since 2018, a group of eight students and graduates from the Harvard Graduate School of Education from four different countries have worked together in leading online learning groups for middle and high school English as a Second Language (ESL) students internationally. Collectively over the last two and a half years, we've led approximately 1500 hours of online classes. A central focus of this program has been to try out different pedagogies to make the online learning experience as meaningful, impactful, personable and engaging as possible for students. Consistently in our learning design, we have sought to cultivate student's global competence, designing learning experiences that offer students opportunities to develop an understanding of different places and people around the world, and a sense that one's thoughts and actions can have an impact on topics of international importance. Alongside our pedagogy-centered goals, we are a not-for-profit that seeks to promote educational and social equality.

On average, after nine classes, among many language and learning benefits, we saw students' self-reported confidence in exploring and discussing international topics in English improve by 35%, and students' enjoyment of English study improve by 22%. Increasingly inspired by the progress we've seen with students as we have consistently sought to improve online learning experiences for students, our group decided to take action, sharing in this book the lessons, takeaways and designs that have helped us facilitate impactful online learning experiences. Much of the discoveries and content of this book come from consistent inquiry, application, and collaboration over the last two years, with 1500+ hours of online teaching time working with students.

## Who Is This Book Beneficial For?

Although our program primarily serves ESL learners, our teaching philosophy centers around an interdisciplinary approach, involving a cross exploration of disciplines sourcing from the literature we read as a group. This model seeks to flip the classroom, having students read, inquire, and explore individually, and then go deeper with such learning in small group-based classes. Rather than teaching English for English sake or in a vacuum, we model our learning around students' lives and real world explorations.

We believe that since Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's) are free and readily available, lecture remains the most common form of instruction for public school classes online, and purely 1-on-1 based out of school tutoring-models limit the potential for development of intra and interpersonal abilities, the students-centered, small group learning model (as is described in this book) has potential in supporting online learners from any subject at any age. That being said, within this book, we focus primarily on our experience, designing programs for English classrooms for high elementary, middle school and secondary school students (approximately ages 10-18) with a base level of fluency in English (able to read at least low-level elementary chapter books). Although, we recommend small group engagement (whether that stands as the primary form of instruction or as a supplementary facilitation model while other students in a class are working independently), teachers in our program have found the culture-building and facilitation strategies described in this text to be useful for classrooms with larger numbers of students as well (on and offline).

- In Chapter 2 of this book, we share the design elements we consider central in creating **"International Inquiry Units"** for students (the learning experiences that are central to our program design).
- Chapter 3 introduces and illustrates **thinking routines used by our team to cultivate students inquiry-based thinking skills and to build student-centered learning environments.**
- Chapter 4 examines our findings that support **culture building in real-time online classrooms**, as well as students' interpersonal skills in the process.
- Chapters 5-8 share **specific cases** of successful learning experiences we've designed and the potential they have for developing students' thinking skills, collaborative abilities, creativity, civic agency, research skills and intrinsic motivation to learn about new contexts and cultures. In the appendices at the end of this book, we provide the unit plans described in Chapters 5-8 and invite educators to try them out with students and to create their own international inquiry units.

Because our team has a lot of experience working within the ESL context in China, and many of the students we work with are based in China, the Chinese context frequently emerges as a theme in narratives and examples. However, outside of China, our team of teachers also has experience teaching ESL in the US, Thailand, Ethiopia, India, New Zealand and Ecuador, and we consider our learning recommendations to be of use across ESL and language learning contexts.

In the remaining portion of this chapter, I hope to introduce some of the foundational observations, experiences and questions that lead to the creation of our online learning program. Questions and considerations integral to the design of learning experiences that we feel are important to consider and continue to explore in the quest to make online learning as meaningful, impactful and personal for students. I will share these observations, experiences and questions through a few short stories that inspired them.

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### **Experience 1: Relationships and Motivation in Online Settings.**

From 2013-2015 I served as a Teach for China fellow and taught at an international school in Shanghai during the summers. To be honest, the 2-year completion rate of Teach for China foreign fellows was not very high from my cohort – I estimate this number to be about 30-40% of fellows who initially showed up to Summer Institute in the summer of 2013. Those who signed up primarily because they thought it would look good on their resume for grad school or it would be a neat existential experience were all gone in the first semester. Those who really struggled with discomforts relating to the cultural-gap and administrative challenges on the behalf of the non-profit or school were typically gone within a year. Those dozen plus teachers who remained in my region had a rare combination of traits, a few primary ones being: **they formed meaningful relationships with their students and loved teaching them, they loved/were interested in learning about the local culture/viewed the overall experience as being a form of learning and growth for themselves as well as students, and they believed in the importance of the social mission of helping those with less opportunity.**

I stayed in close contact with one teacher who graduated from the fellowship alongside me. As a fellow in the program, he was always innovating and improving the classroom experience for students. He decided to return to the US after completing the fellowship, take some time off to write, and to work half-time with one of the biggest Chinese online tutoring companies with a name similar to “Extremely Important Child”. This organization had boomed in just a few short years from a few teachers to a few thousand teachers. It is a model built on efficiency, where a customer could instantly schedule an appointment with a foreign English teacher, similar to the way that you can summon an Uber/Didi driver to one’s house. Over the past 20 years, having a foreign teacher teach one’s child in China went from a luxury afforded primarily the children of the elite, to being much more accessible to the middle and upper economic classes, aided by a blend of technology and rising per capita income/wealth. Yet over the couple years of finishing up our fellowship, it became clear that something was wrong when talking to my friend. To sum it all up, when I asked him what his motivation level was like to teach for this organization, he responded saying, “I have absolutely no motivation.”

Although the 1 on 1 model with a revolving door of foreign teachers, centered around “scripted” fixed track practice English fundamentals, may be beneficial for bolstering students foundational skills (and 1 on 1’s are by far the extracurricular method for English study preferred by most Chinese parents), overtime relying on this system comes with some often unforeseen negative consequences. First, it takes the “relationship” out of language learning, leaving with children the impression that English is a good you pay for. In other words, pay \$20, have a 25-minute class, and you may never see that teacher again. English learned, transaction

complete. Without those relationships, for a foreign teacher the student on the other side of the internet connection remains distant and unrelatable (and vice-versa) and it's almost inevitable that teachers will come to do it for the money. From my perspective as a Chinese language learner, it was the friends I made and the intrinsic motivation surrounding a deepening understanding of Chinese culture that pushed me to go further with my language study. This motivation was a large factor in helping me go from not being able to speak a word of Chinese, to being able to take 5<sup>th</sup> year Chinese during my master's and to achieve a perfect score on the "Oral Proficiency Interview" administered to students of US State Department funded programs within 5 years. It is unthinkable that I could've gone that far as a learner without authentic connections with others – it was the connections that made the learning so rich, authentic and enjoyable.

As I spoke with parents whose students had participated in the aforementioned corporate models, I realized that many shared my sentiment,

“这个commercial 的路线会让孩子交流一段时间后，课程结束了，你不再交钱，跟这个老师一点点connection 或 friendship 都没有。这个时候其实孩子也比较伤心，这种网络的教育情况，不是我想要的。。。我比较想要一个配的过程。”

“I've found in this sort of commercial route, it will let students and teachers interact, but after the curriculum is over and you're no longer giving them money, you won't be able to have the slightest connection or friendship with the teacher. It really hurts students to go through that process. I don't want that kind of class experience for my children . . . I'm hoping for more of a shared experience . . . ”

In addition, research shows that when teachers integrate topics that they are passionate about into learning experiences, there are positive effects on student learning. Autonomy is one of the greatest motivating factors for teachers and students, and with the revolving door 1 on 1 structure, it is difficult to offer much autonomy, because it's easiest to coordinate and stay on the same page between the number of teachers and students by adhering closely to a fixed track of learning.

In 2020 as public schools around the world quickly transitioned online, similarly to the out of school learning experiences described above, many students and teachers struggle to maintain motivation. One parent, educator and former-classmate of mine shared online, “I'm losing my battle with this online learning as a parent. I was trying to get (my child) to cooperate, and he gave me this to watch: (Video: “Don't Stay in School” by Boyinaband - the opening lines of the song go: “I wasn't taught how to get a job, but I can remember dissecting a frog. I wasn't taught how to pay tax, but I know loads about Shakespeare's classics. I was never taught how to vote, they devoted that time to defining isotopes. I wasn't taught how to look after my health, but mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. I never spent a lesson on current events, instead I studied the old American west.”) The lyrics of the song and elementary students relation to them, speaks of an increased dissatisfaction and demotivating-nature of learning that is not relevant to students' lives' and the increasingly interconnected world in which we are all living. In addition, the higher the student:teacher ratio becomes for a class, the more difficult it is to make each student feel recognized and valued, especially when the teacher is never able to see the student outside of a video chat box. Needed are more methods and learning opportunities

that support students as thought partners as they inquire about the world, supporting them as individuals over time.

Key Questions Raised:

**How can we bring teachers and students meaningful relationship building opportunities in online settings, that promote long term motivation in language study?**

**How can teachers and students be given the right level of autonomy, so they are able to use their creativity, while also creating highly impactful learning experiences?**

**How can students be supported as learners, as they inquire about important local and global topics, and their role across contexts?**

### **Experience 2 : “Look at that student, he doesn’t dare to speak in this classroom.”**

It is not uncommon in Master’s classes at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that the teacher is talking less than students in the class. To teachers who lead classes in such a manner, there is nothing better than when students consider a text or topic deeply, make connections to different contexts and either expand on the topic or challenge it. Students from different educational backgrounds adapt and acclimate to these environments in a variety of different ways. Looking specifically at the experience of many Chinese students new to the US, one quote from a Chinese classmate stands out in my mind “Look at that student, they’re a graduate from Beijing University (arguably the most renowned university in China), yet they don’t dare speak to the professor during class.” Whenever I mentioned this to Chinese classmates, many of them would nod their head and say they could relate to these challenges to acclimation as well. For many students accustomed to learning environments with a high student to teacher ratio and the norm of the teacher being the primary supplier of knowledge and information, adjusting to discussion-centered environments, exploring subjective topics without an easy to define answer can prove challenging.

Harvard Learning Expert Tony Wagner conducted interviews with hundreds of business leaders across industries and companies from Apple to Unilever, asking what skills their companies look for in new hires. Surprisingly, many leaders felt that technological skills were less urgent and could be developed overtime, but one of the key essential skills was collaboration. Mike Summers, vice president for Global Talent Management at Dell, said, “Kids just out of school have an amazing lack of preparedness in general leadership skills and collaborative skills.” Another CEO interviewed shared, “All of our work is done in teams. You have to know how to work well with others. But you also have to know how to engage customers— to find out what their needs are. If you can’t engage others, then you won’t learn what you need to know.”

The issue of relying primarily on two types of instruction: lecture-based classrooms with a high student to teacher ratio, and 1 on 1 out of school classes, is that students most often have little opportunity to partake in forms of discussion and collaboration central to colleges and workplaces: raising a subjective topic, without an easy to define answer, and soliciting participants to reason with evidence, think together, discuss, question and challenge the ideas presented.

In order to prepare a student to truly acclimate to environments that rely on discussion and collaboration for learning and forward progress, it is important that teachers focus on knowledge and language skills, but also the ability to actively participate in the learning experience alongside others and to recognize “the process” as being important to learning and understanding, rather than expecting answers and content to be cleanly delivered from the teacher.

Key Questions Raised:

**How can we create environments online where students can experience and become better prepared for discussion centered, student centered learning environments?**

**How can teachers in the online setting be more of a “Guide at the Side”, rather than a “Sage on the ‘Stage/Screen’?”**

### **Experience 3: Letting Teachers Experiment, Innovate and Try New Things Over Time**

For teachers at public and private institutions, opportunities for growth and professional development is tied to motivation. (Guerriero 2015, Iliya & Ifeoma 2015, Gokce 2010) However, professional development for out of school educational programs is often scarce. I once heard the founder and CEO of one of the largest Chinese tutoring organizations (valued at 27 Billion dollars) give a speech at a conference, where he said, “Our organization has the best teachers, we don’t hire ‘trash teachers’ like some of our competitors”. He actually used the term 垃圾老师 (trash teachers) ! At HGSE I met a master’s student who worked with that organization for a number of years, who shared that “they don’t care at all about teacher growth and development, it would be far more expensive to train and give teachers solid professional development, than to just hire fresh new graduates from a top university with good test results and pay them a lower salary till they move on.”

From all that I’ve learned about teacher professional development from 5 years of studying and working at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I would summarize the most important aspect to “Longitudinal, small group, inquiry based learning for teachers.” In a nutshell, teachers perform best when they are longitudinally supported in using best practices, where they have opportunities to try things out in the classroom, collaborate with a coach or another experienced teacher, and then are provided spaces to share, reflect and plan. In our initial stage, Students for Students operated with a fairly small team of 4 teachers (including myself), but I am happy to share that in a country with a 50% attrition rate for new teachers within the first 5 years, more than 2 years into the program 100% of teachers continue to teach. A fundamental part of this is that similar to the intimate learning communities we seek to promote for students, we also seek to promote our teachers. After sharing best practices, and raising inquiries and innovations from teachers, they have the freedom to try things out, succeed, fail, and improve overtime. We share our inquiries and findings as a group and seek to grow collectively over time. The content of this book is meant to reflect many of these inquiries.

Key Question Raised:

**How does online learning benefit from taking professional development as seriously as top schools and educational programs?**

**Experience 4: “The Need for Study and Understanding of Different Cultures and Contexts Around the World Will Stay the Same”**

In 2017, I was selected to participate in the US State Department funded Critical Language Scholarship program, which sends a small group of US scholars around the world to study 12 different languages critical to the future economic and diplomatic success in the US (in the form of 2-month intensive immersion based programs). During orientation, a student asked a department head within the US State Department if she expected there to be a need for language study in the future as AI translation technology rapidly improves. She shared that even if the need for multilingual speakers is diminished by AI, “the need for study and understanding of different cultures around the world will stay the same.” From my experience studying and working abroad this rings true – at this stage, the cultural knowledge and understanding is just as important, if not more important than the language study itself. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) - Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World report shares: developing students’ international global competence is important in helping students both “thrive in a changing labor market” and “live harmoniously in multicultural communities” citing “since the end of the Cold War, ethno-cultural conflicts have become the most common source of political violence in the world and they show no sign of abating.” (OECD, 2018) Inline with these considerations, the learning design and experiences described in the following chapter seek not to promote English for English sake, but rather to use language study as a platform for promoting international curiosity, inquiry and understanding.

Key Questions Raised:

**How can we help students cultivate international curiosity and understanding alongside language study?**

**How does international inquiry influence students’ motivation and interest in language study?**

In sum, the previously stated questions and ideals have driven the mission and learning design for international inquiry units (explored in chapter 2) and the Students for Students program. In the chapters that follow, we will look at elements that have positively influenced our lesson design, and key learning experiences that we’ve found inspiring in the realm of online learning.