

# Students, teachers need to be transculturally literate, expert says

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To adequately prepare today's students for tomorrow's global economy, U. of I. teacher education expert Mark Dressman favors "transcultural education," which he defines as an experience that goes beyond the traditional rite-of-passage trip to western Europe. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The current generation of college students and teachers need to be as culturally fluent with people from different cultures as they are with their own, a soft skill that has become an essential part of life in the 21st century, a University of Illinois expert on teacher education says.

According to Mark Dressman, a professor in the department of curriculum and instruction in the College of [Education](#) at Illinois, the current group of college students will inherit a workplace where they will need to be prepared for "significant contact with the rest of the world."

To adequately prepare today's students for tomorrow's [global economy](#), Dressman favors "transcultural education," which he defines as an experience that goes beyond the traditional rite-of-passage trip to western Europe.

"In addition to developing an identity as someone from a particular city, state or country, transcultural education focuses on getting students to start thinking of themselves as citizens of the world," he said. "It's a relatively new approach that is being applied across a number of fields, including education, nursing and business."

Dressman says that transcultural education is an approach to teaching and learning that is "dialogic and interdisciplinary" in nature. Rather than learn about other cultures from a distance, a transcultural approach moves students and teachers toward learning through direct engagement with a culture's members and its perspectives.

Ideally, transcultural education goes beyond traditional course readings and discussions to include students having what Dressman calls "a fairly profound and authentic experience of another culture, one they can't get in a course on campus, or even in a study-abroad trip to Europe, and one that requires them to communicate with others as co-equals."

For Dressman, a former Peace Corps volunteer who worked in Morocco, an authentic experience of "otherness" is one that takes students out of their comfort zone, broadens their cultural horizons and then returns them to their lives with an enriched sense of the scope and sweep of world events, and of how the U.S. influences - and, in turn, is influenced by - world culture and commerce.

Dressman already has plans to take a class of Illinois undergraduates to Morocco this spring. Students will follow eight weeks of study of Moroccan history, politics, language, culture and education with a two-

week trip to Rabat, where they'll meet with students at a university, and Azrou, a small city in the Middle Atlas mountains, where they'll help high school students to prepare for their version of the baccalaureate exam.

"Any student who has an authentic experience of interacting with students from a Middle Eastern country is going to have a different view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. involvement in western Asia," he said. "They're inevitably going to have a different and hopefully more informed perspective."

In these cash-strapped times, Dressman said that the Web 2.0 tools that are already an intimate part of students' everyday lives - e-mail, blogs and YouTube videos, to name a few - can act as an inexpensive force-multiplier.

"Online tools really can make the world smaller," he said. "If you take a few students somewhere and they take photos and videos of their experiences, they can share it with their peers and inform a broader range of students."

For the eight-week class on Moroccan culture, Dressman has created a social networking site to promote and demonstrate transcultural teaching and learning, and to function as a virtual meeting space for educators interested in the subject.

Educating students to think globally about the shared problems that affect both the United States and the world at large is an essential first step to solving them, but Dressman said globally conscious teachers who can inspire their pupils to see beyond their own borders also are needed.

"From the point-of-view of teacher education, I think it's absolutely critical that we teach our teachers how to think and communicate from a

global perspective, so they can teach students how to look at the problems the world faces through a different prism."

Dressman cites the worldly supporting cast assembled by President Barack Obama - including senior adviser Valerie Jarrett and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, all of whom have spent significant time living and studying abroad - to help solve the nation's problems and rehabilitate America's image in the world. As a boy, Obama lived for four years in Indonesia, and it was his cultured, worldly perspective that helped elevate him from the senate to the presidency, Dressman said.

But regardless of whether you're a politician or a teacher, Dressman said, you can't explain current events - terrorism, global warming and the current global financial meltdown - without bringing the rest of the world into the picture.

"I'm not an economist, but I think it's strikingly clear how closely the world's economies are linked and how interdependent we all are on each other," he said. "Teachers need to be able to raise those issues and give their [students](#) a much broader experience of the world."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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