



Aceh, Sumatra. Photo by Amy Brueck.

Diversity among Themselves, Diversity in Others

by Amy Brueck

Snapshot of a Skype Session

“It’s Abby’s birthday!” my 6th-grade students announce as they enter my classroom for our morning Skype Club. The faces of our Skype friends appear on our computer screen from across the world in Sumatra, Indonesia. Abby sits directly in front of the camera, surrounded by her friends. The students in Sumatra learn it’s her birthday and immediately start to sing a celebratory song in Indonesian. Abby already knows this song because she is a student of Indonesian heritage, like the other ten students in the Skype Club. Although the students in my Philadelphia classroom listen to the song intently, no one joins in.

On the other side of the camera, 12 Indonesian middle-school students sing us the song by heart. They range in age from 12 to 16. Many have just returned from dinner or evening prayers at the mosque. Since they attend a boarding school, it is possible for them to Skype with us during their evening hours.

After the students finish the song, Abby smiles. The students start to ask about birthday celebrations and traditions, across continents.

This is a common scene in my morning Skype Club at Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS). My students Skype with middle-school students from Indonesia for about 20 minutes on Friday once every few weeks during the Morning Meeting period. Both groups of students use a laptop connected to a projector and speakers to enable all students to see and hear the conversation. Although only three or four students are able to sit in front of the camera at one time, they learn to coordinate and take turns before each session begins.

I made contact with the partnering school, Sekolah Sukma Bangsa, after a friend introduced me to the principal during my summer travels in Indonesia. After an inspiring conversation on the benefits of forming friendships across cultures, the principal and I were eager to connect our

students. Although my contact was made in person, it is also possible to use websites such as ePALS to find collaborating teachers in other countries.

All my students have a connection to Indonesian heritage, through one or both parents. However, all have also been born and raised in the United States. They have varying exposure to Indonesian language at home. Additionally, while some students regularly participate in communities of Indonesian diaspora in Philadelphia such as dance groups or religious communities, others have less interaction with people from their heritage culture.

Why Start a Skype Club?

After noticing my students' genuine interest in connecting with Indonesian students of a similar age through Skype, I wondered what I could do to create a space at school where they would feel comfortable not only making new friends from Indonesia, but also using their Indonesian language and learning from one another. This strategy directly draws from the folk arts education practice of using students' experiences as a teaching tool. "When students are asked to recall, reflect upon, and share their life experiences as part of instruction, these memories and stories become available to be used as texts" (Deafenbaugh 2015).

I wanted students to connect and learn from each other's experiences with Indonesian tradition, culture, or language. However, instead of encouraging the students to find "sameness," I wanted them to notice that there are many ways to connect to heritage and individuals can choose the way that suits them best. Some students are interested in language, others want to learn dance, and still others focus on deepening friendships within the club. They are all members of the folk group of our Skype Club, and yet they are each unique within our folk group.

In addition to noticing differences among themselves, I also hoped that the students would form real friendships with their Indonesian friends, especially since the friendships might teach them to see beyond stereotypes. I did not want students to take this single experience as a way to generalize about all the people of Indonesia, but rather as an opportunity to learn about the variety of unique peoples and traditions found, even within a single rural city in Indonesia. I aimed for my students to see themselves and their Indonesian friends as individuals, and thus practice the skill of *deategorization*: "with decategorization, group boundaries are degraded, inducing members of different groups to conceive of themselves and others as separate individuals and encouraging more personalized interactions" (Dovidio 2004). In addition to learning about each other, Skype sessions offer a window for students to gain a more nuanced understanding of different regions in Indonesia.

Since most of my students' family members come from the island of Java, they have limited knowledge about daily life on the island of Sumatra, where their Skype friends live. Additionally,

Aceh, Indonesia

The province of Aceh is located in Indonesia at the northernmost tip of the island of Sumatra. Most people observe Shariah law, as Aceh is home to the highest percentage of Muslims in Indonesia. There are ten ethnic groups in the region, the largest of which is Acehnese. In 2004, the western coast of Aceh was struck by an Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, which took the lives of 170,000 Indonesians. The Sukma Bangsa schools were built after the tsunami in an effort to provide high-quality education for students in the region.

many students' families emigrated from major cities such as Jakarta or Surabaya, in contrast to our Skype friends, who are from the rural town of Pidie in the region of Aceh.

Tracking Progress

As always, progress takes time. Although my club has met during the FACTS Morning Meeting¹ period roughly once every two weeks for the last academic year, I have set significant learning goals with strict time constraints. The brief 20-minute sessions leave limited time for conversation with depth. Additionally, while the Indonesian teachers are available to schedule and facilitate the Skype sessions, I have not asked them to guide their students in reflections after the Skype sessions. Thus, I can only report data about my students' reflections. Despite the limitations, my students in Philadelphia have certainly made new observations and relationships; they remember each other's faces and look forward to seeing one another. In this article, I share the reflections and learning activities that led to deeper understanding, as well as those that needed improvement. While this is a work in progress, I hope that my experience can be useful to others who want to implement online programs that connect students in different parts of the world.

Thus far, I collected data about my students' experiences from written reflections, Venn diagrams, letters to Skype friends, as well as recorded conversations. This data provided information about the observations of my 6th graders in Philadelphia thus far, as well as next steps for our future Skype Club meetings. I'm unable to share information about the Acehnese students because I have not collaborated with the teachers there on these assignments.

Teaching Students to Become Ethnographers

For the first activity, I taught students to investigate actively the school culture in Aceh by using a basic two-column "I see/I question" ethnographic notetaking style while observing a photo slideshow about the Acehnese school. We use this notetaking tool at FACTS when teaching folk arts education inquiry skills. Since our Acehnese friends all attend boarding school, these initial photos helped the students generate questions so they could understand more details about their friends' daily lives. It was also clear that the students were comparing their friends' school with their school experience, thereby enriching their understanding of their own school culture. For example, after seeing a picture of a group of girls watching TV together at the dormitory, one student asked, "Do girls have different classes than boys? Can they talk to boys?" After seeing a picture of a large, open-air cafeteria, students asked, "Why do they have a better school than us?"

I SEE / I QUESTION notetaking format

I see	I question
<p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>I see only girls watching television in the dormitory.</i></p>	<p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>Are girls allowed to play with boys after school?</i></p>

Do they make their own food? Do they eat everything with their hands?” After observing the clothes, students asked “Do all the girls have to wear head-scarves? Why do they dress fancy?” Students generated questions so that they could find out more about the daily schedule, classes, sports, and hobbies of their friends, because in folk arts education, we stress that culture is ordinary and embedded in easily accessible daily activities.

After the first few sessions, I asked students to express their feelings during the Skype sessions. It has been found that “emotions such as discomfort and anxiety are typically dominant features of intergroup contact and interaction that can interfere with effective communication” (Dovidio 2004), so I wanted to gauge student reactions to address any issues. Students listed a range of emotions, for example, “I feel all different feelings like excited, nervous, scared, happy.” Another stated, “I feel a lot going on in my mind like what will they say about me?” Although students expressed that interactions were often uncomfortable because of long pauses in the conversation, I reassured them that this was a normal part of communication across language barriers. I instructed them to speak one person at a time, slow down, and sometimes give background information before describing everyday experiences so that their friends could have a better context for understanding. Over time, I noticed that some students intentionally changed their communication style in the ways above. When asked what we should do to avoid the “awkward pauses” that inevitably occurred during conversation, one student offered, “We need to find our similarities and differences!” Thus, students selected questions about the hobbies and preferences of their Skype friends for following sessions. Over time, they shared information about favorite movies, video games, sports, and classes. As they grew more comfortable, they began to express opinions on controversial topics, such as our presidential election or the new design for Indonesian currency, which was quite similar to the style of the Chinese Yuan. One student expressed, “The more we talk to them, the more they get comfortable with us.”

As I noticed the communication style improve, I asked my students to fill out a Venn diagram to encourage them to reflect on the similarities and differences that they shared with their Acehnese friends. In doing so, they were also beginning to position themselves in relationship to their friends. Although the diagrams showed that most students shared a similar taste in Indonesian foods, other aspects of Indonesian life, such as eating meals with hands, design of showers or toilets, forms of transportation, currency, and the tropical environment were totally different. With dismay I realized that the Venn diagrams seemed to produce a polarizing effect, in which many of my students lumped the Indonesian students into a homogenous group that had more differences than similarities to themselves.

However, not all students responded in the same way—one showed a greater identification with Indonesian culture than the others. She wrote in her reflection, “It feels nice when we talk to people from **our** culture.” This student actively identified with her Indonesian friends, despite the tangible differences in daily life.

Seeing Our Friends as Individuals

With the guidance of our school's folklife education specialist, Linda Deafenbaugh, I devised a plan to help my students think about their friends as individuals, rather than overgeneralizing. I invited them to join me in a lunchtime conversation and directly asked, "How are our friends different from one another on the surface? How are they different from one another deeper down?"

These guiding questions were designed to help students access both easily visible tangible traditions and the deeper intangible culture that undergirds them. These questions proved far more productive than the Venn diagram and allowed students to highlight individual differences among our Acehese friends.



Photo from slideshow: School cafeteria at Sekolah Sukma Bangsa Pidie, Aceh. Courtesy of the author.

When considering outside characteristics, students showed sensitivity by avoiding assumptions about people based upon their clothing or the way they looked. They said they noticed that, on the surface, some students were Filipino and some were Indonesian. However, one student clarified that "I couldn't really tell if they were Indonesian or Filipino unless they told us." Also, on the surface, many students mentioned that girls wore the hijab as part of their Muslim religion. One student expressed, "You can definitely see if there are people who are Muslim because of their hijab, but if there are ones that aren't wearing the hijab it still doesn't mean that they're not Muslim, but we don't actually know for sure."

For characteristics of personality, students repeatedly mentioned that "some of them are more outgoing than others." The most outgoing and brave Acehese students performed songs or dances during our Skype sessions. One student explained that she admired a student who "was so brave to sing in front of us and he actually has a good voice. He always starts the conversation and always answers the questions without any hesitation." One student expressed a pattern he noticed, without overgeneralizing about all Indonesians, by saying "A lot of the Indonesian people over there are really nice, like the kids, but...it's just *that* school, so I actually don't know, like, the other people."

Additionally, I realized that students were getting to know each other's personalities through the body language that they observed. One mentioned that there were shy students in the background who never spoke. However, these students were still actively communicating without words. One student expressed, "I remember this one time when...I was sitting with my hand like *this*, and then the guy across from me did the same exact thing, but he did it purposely and then he tapped the girl next to him and was like 'look!'"

Before this conversation, I didn't realize that the students were using body language to communicate about their personalities across the screen. One student described, "Some of our

personalities are like the same. Like the way we talk to each other...When they're in front of us I feel like they're scared, but when they're talking to their friends it's like when *we* talk to *our* friends." Finally, I realized that students were conveying their personalities visually, even by the way that they chose to interact with their peers in the same room while they were on camera. In these informal lunchtime conversations, I also revisited the question of finding commonalities or "connections" with our friends in Aceh. This time, I got more varied responses than through the Venn diagram. In addition to repeating that "we both kinda like to eat the same foods," students also acknowledged that social media, video games, and communication style among friends were commonalities across cultures.

Additionally, I noticed that although students were not always directly comparing their Acehnese friends with themselves, some were reflecting more deeply on the schooling experiences of their Indonesian parents. "I told my parents about what we do here with the Skype and then I always ask them the difference between [the Acehnese] school and my parents' school..." By asking these questions, students were able to uncover more information about their parents' lives in Indonesia. In this way, the Skype sessions led them to inquire about their personal family history on a deeper level.

Finally, I noticed that students were gaining a more detailed understanding of the region where their friends' school was located, which connected back to one of my original goals. One student explained that in Aceh, "they do farming and planting. When I lived in Indo, all I did was go to amusement parks and go to arcades." Another student expressed surprise at the new construction in the area, "Many of the places I've been in Indonesia are really old and not new. But in Aceh it's really new." They connected the new construction to the rebuilding in the region after the tsunami in 2009. Many students were interested to learn more about the impact of the tsunami in the community.

The lunchtime conversations were also fruitful because I got student input into their preferred activities for future Skype sessions. Students responded with a strong motivation to connect with their heritage language. One student, who was more fluent in Indonesian, told me that she often heard new Indonesian words during the Skype conversation and then returned home to ask her father about the meaning. Another student mentioned that it was "not fair" that we were speaking primarily in English to the other students. After that comment, we rehearsed greetings and questions in Indonesian. For the following Skype meeting, students were able to initiate a conversation entirely in Indonesian. This represented an important step for the club, because this was the first time I heard my students willingly speak Indonesian during Skype. In the past, even those students who consistently spoke Indonesian at home had often hesitated before speaking Indonesian aloud during the Skype sessions. I hope that the more we practice Indonesian greetings and questions ahead of time, the more the students in Philadelphia will begin to speak it spontaneously.

Thus far, my students have gained a greater understanding of their peers as individuals and the particular region of Aceh, Sumatra. They have also increased their use of Indonesian language. Some unexpected outcomes were that some students were communicating with body language and that the Skype sessions prompted them to ask more questions about their parents' schooling experiences.

Next Steps

One challenge of the Skype Club is that some students are less inclined to share personal thoughts and feelings in front of a peer group. Some ideas I have for the future include giving each student a specific “pen pal” to write to each week while we prepare for upcoming the Skype sessions. Students could write emails to this person with specific questions, and therefore strengthen individual friendships within the group. Pen pal emails would lead to increased personal communication, as well as trust and understanding between each pair of students.

Additionally, I’d like to have shared objectives with the teachers in Aceh. Although those teachers are eager for their students to gain English language practice, their students don’t share my objectives of exploring heritage and so are not equally focused on conducting inquiry into cultural similarities and differences. If teachers in both countries were united with the same objectives, I believe that all the students would interact with more depth. The principal of Sukma Bangsa and I plan to discuss how to improve our program for the upcoming year.

At the end of the school year when students will engage in reflective writing about the year-long Skype Club experience and their learning about their own and others' cultures, I will ask them to set a goal for how they plan to continue their exploration of Indonesian culture. For example, “I connect to Indonesian heritage in _____ way. I would like to ____(action)__ in order to continue participating as ‘an active-culture maker’ in my heritage culture.” Each student will presumably have different goals or ways of connecting with culture. I will have them present to each other their different goals. We will all support each other in the process.

The Skype Club has taught me a great deal about the challenges of teaching cultural awareness, as well as having a dialogue across difference. However, as I’ve watched the students learn from one another, express themselves more openly, and eagerly arrive at the Friday Skype sessions, I’m quite certain that this program is a step in the right direction as students begin to explore what Indonesian heritage means for themselves, on a personal level.

Amy Brueck is an ESOL teacher with expertise in teaching children and adults from diverse backgrounds in Indonesia, Spain, Philadelphia, and rural New York. She has Pennsylvania teacher certifications in ESL and Spanish language.

Notes

1. Morning Meeting is described in detail in the article “Newcomer English Learners Building Language and Belonging through Folk Arts Education” on page 25, this issue.

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- Deafenbaugh, Linda. 2015. "Folklife Education: A Warm Welcome Schools Extend to Communities." *Journal of Folklore and Education*. 2:76-83, <http://www.locallearningnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Deafenbaugh.pdf>.
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