

## Teacherless Observations

By Paul Magnuson

Yesterday I observed a 90-minute physical education class and a 45-minute geography class. In both cases there was no teacher and I was not the substitute, just the observer.

The teachers had plenty of warning that I wanted to observe their classes at a time when the teachers themselves weren't there. In fact, just about three weeks ago I wrote to them:

"Once during marking period 4 I'd like to do a 'teacherless' observation in one of your classes. The goal: How well can the students organize themselves in order to sustain learning over the course of the hour? The set up: Pick a class and prepare so that you don't have to be in the class hour at all. I'll take attendance and then simply observe. This plays very nicely into our overarching goal of creating self-regulated learners..."

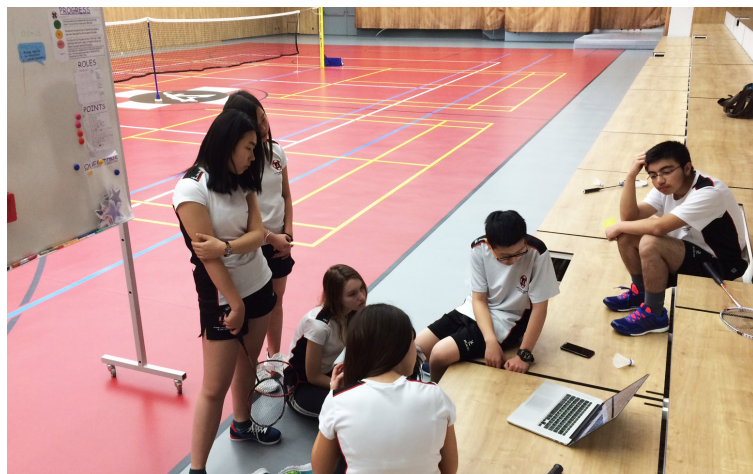
And now I've observed six teacherless classes and I'm excited about it.

Yes, it's a little unusual. I'm not observing in class to see how well the teacher is managing, but rather how well the teacher has managed to instill self-organization in the students. I'm observing the result of the teaching and learning that created a class that can be run—and run well—by independent learners.

In the PE class, my notes record how the first two students arrived two minutes early and began setting up the gym for badminton. The students played two single elimination tournaments. The class leader did a short lesson on overhead smashes. They reviewed terminology with each other and updated their vocabulary score cards. And they organized two games of doubles in the last ten

minutes of class because they had extra time.

I was equally impressed during the geography lesson. Students were to use an image of the world's tectonic plates, projected for all to see, in order to construct paper models of tectonic plates that they would place on a world map. Afterwards they would map out volcanic and seismic hot spots.



Jerry leads his classmates in a review of the badminton smash. Behind him is the whiteboard the class has learned to use to self-organize (photo: Magnuson).

The students got right to work. As they worked, they chatted about other classes and after-school activities. They moved around quite a bit, but mostly grouped around a big map of the world. One student went and found what he thought was a clearer picture of the tectonic plates. Students talked about whether they were cheating by finding additional materials. One of them reminded the others that it wasn't cheating if they were learning.

At the end of the class they cleaned up, unplugged the computer from the projector, and left the room. I felt like doing fist pumps in the sudden quiet. These students are good at self-direction!

Then, this morning, I observed another lesson, this time in English. Half of the students did not use the time well and I spent most of the 45 minutes reminding myself not to intervene as group work fell to just one student while the other members chatted. Argh!

So it turns out that not all our students are able to be good self-directed learners all of the

time. And while I'm sure it makes some people uneasy to read that I watched off-task students stay off task for a complete 45 minutes, I offer this in my defense: if our goal is to create lifelong, independent learners, then we have to give students the tools and the opportunities to practice self-directed learning. Like a young person practicing for a piano recital, much of the practice time is filled with music no one in particular wants to listen to. But it's practice and it's necessary for the performance down the road. ●

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## Pecha Kucha: A Precision Tool for Learning & Growth

By Ettie Zilber

"No more death by powerpoint." This is how my graduate students learned that their final projects would have to be presented to the class using 20 pre-timed slides totaling 6 minutes and 40 seconds, giving them only 20 seconds per slide. No more read-aloud bullet lists. Instead, they would have to select images that relayed their message without the use of bullets whatsoever. This is pecha kucha (PK), a technique whose name means "chit-chat" in Japanese. Since its origins in Japan's expat circles, it has become a popular evening activity around the world for the exchange of ideas and information.

I first learned about pecha kucha from Daniel Pink, author of *To Sell is Human*, and immediately sensed that this approach could be applied to presentations in my course with the aim of enhancing learning. The assignment for this Master's course required students to convert their final projects into a "pitch" and present it for assessment by class colleagues and by the instructor.

Though some students struggled with language issues, they nailed the exercise with aplomb and panache. What's more, as current and future administrators, they demonstrated how they might perform under pressure with merciless time constraints and outside their comfort zone. Many even managed to include humor, despite their nervousness. I was so proud of these current and future leaders!

Among the challenges and difficulties, students frequently cited the forced entry into the "discomfort zone," where they



In pecha kucha, speakers show 20 slides for 20 seconds each, keeping presentations concise and fast-paced (photo: Creative Commons).

had to grapple with a new paradigm when stakes were high and time was short. Keeping to the prescribed format of PK without falling back into familiar practices was also challenging for many. Then there was the labor-intensive process of finding images to serve as metaphors for the message. Many found it hard to pare their comments down, as directed, using fewer words and more exact language timed to correspond with the slides. All felt they could have used more time, preparation, practice, and synchronization with their team.

As for the benefits of the PK approach, participants were unanimous in stating that it forced better thought practices, produced a sharper analysis, and required greater preparation than a slideshow with fewer constraints. There was a general sense that

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## Space, Scheduling, and Staffing: Three Challenges of ESL Programs Worldwide

By Bonnie Billak

Three of the most common challenges among ESL programs worldwide are space, scheduling, and staffing. Let's take a closer look at the characteristics of each challenge and explore some possible ways to approach its resolution.

Finding rooms to house ESL classes seems to be a never-ending problem at many schools. Part of the difficulty lies with the administration's willingness to accept large numbers of ESL students without allocating space in which to receive them.

While students with high English proficiency levels can often benefit from push-in classes, those at lower levels require pull-out classes, located in areas that are quiet and appropriate for teaching—which is to say, not in hallways, in the corner of a noisy classroom, etc.

Forward-thinking administrators will often hire extra staff to teach the growing numbers of ESL students. Anticipating the need for additional teaching space doesn't always occur to them, and can cause a bottleneck issue, since building capacity is not something that can be expanded overnight. Many just figure ESL teachers will work something out. But if the number of ESL

students continues to grow, the school will eventually max out.

Scheduling is the second challenge that causes major headaches for schools. Classroom teachers want students to attend ESL classes but not to miss the content material they are presenting. Pulling students out of their classes disrupts their day and makes it difficult for them to catch up their work. In dilemmas such as this, one successful solution is to take ESL students for pull-out classes during their language arts period. In this way, their ESL work effectively replaces the language arts material they are missing in the classroom, thereby eliminating the need to make it up.

Some schools ask ESL teachers to pull students during reading time. This practice should be avoided at all costs, since reading is the skill that takes the longest to develop (five to seven years). Students benefit tremendously from receiving reading assistance in the ESL class in addition to what is offered in the classroom. This double exposure accelerates their acquisition of reading skills, such that pulling kids out during regularly scheduled reading sessions is actually detrimental to their learning.

To further complicate matters, other schools feel that no pull-out classes should be allowed,

whatsoever. While understandable from a classroom teacher's standpoint, this option should be off the table. Students just starting to learn English need the protective environment offered by an ESL classroom in order to develop the self-confidence necessary to spreading their wings and testing the English they've

Staffing is the third most common challenge in building an effective ESL program. Many administrators feel that any English speaker can teach ESL. This couldn't be further from the truth. ESL is a complex field whose successful implementation requires educators with specialized training. Too often, a school's ESL staff consists of spouses of international school teachers for whom no other position is available or other untrained teachers. Schools should commit to actively recruiting teachers with degrees in ESL teaching, not those who obtained a certificate by attending a two-hour ESL seminar.

With adequate attention and careful planning, the challenges involved in offering effective ESL instruction can be overcome, resulting in the creation of positive environments for the acquisition of English. Due to the large number

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## Pecha Kucha

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the exercise encouraged creativity and had added to students' personal and professional growth. Most felt it would appeal to various audiences.

Pecha kucha, we concluded, could be profitably implemented in making presentations to various groups, including parents, administration, board, staff, and students. It could serve as a way of pitching the school at recruitment and other fairs. Educators could encourage their own students to embrace the method, using it in their own presentations and pitches.

On the personal level, a few students described a shift in their feelings. "I must admit, I was skeptical about pecha kucha in the beginning... however, after seeing all of the other groups' presentations and experiencing it myself... I think it was a successful experiment!... [despite the difficulties] I do think I learned a great deal from this experience." Also, "I think this was the most useful of all of the projects I've done to date in terms of getting me to think critically about how to get my thoughts out to other people in a way that is effective." Another student reflected: "It is a very powerful way to present and I'm very happy to have done it. It has taught me to consider carefully how I present myself."

A number of participants indicated their discomfort with public speaking, in general, but felt that this strategy helped them prepare, practice and develop this very important skill. "At first I hated the idea of the pecha kucha but now I see how effective it can really be."

Judging from the participants' evaluation and continued application of this technique, it seems worth passing on to students, educators, and educational leaders. As an approach that values brevity and precision, it could be valuable as a teaching and learning tool in the curriculum, in the community, and for marketing purposes.

I offer this up for your consideration and would love to hear how you implemented this strategy in your communities. ●

*Dr. Ettie Zilber has served as an educator and leader at international schools in Israel, Singapore, China, Guatemala, Spain and the U.S. She has also served as Adjunct Professor for various universities which offer international Master's/ Doctoral programs.*

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### Resources

Pink, D. (2013). *To Sell is Human*. NY: Riverhead Books.

A Pecha Kucha about Pecha Kucha. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj2yeplaAtE>

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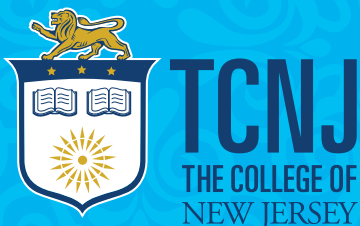
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