



Achieving intercultural understanding in schools

**Rhiannen Gimpel,
John Paul College, Queensland**

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John Paul College is a co-educational Early Learning to Year 12, independent, ecumenical school located in Daisy Hill, south of Brisbane. The school, which has around 2200 students, has a significantly above-average [Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage \(ICSEA\)](#) value. John Paul College has been taking part in Thailand BRIDGE since 2013 and has a partnership with Kantharalak Wittaya School in Sisaket, Thailand. In 2014, the College joined Korea BRIDGE, developing a partnership with Sunsime Middle School in South Korea.

Rhiannen's intercultural understanding definition

Intercultural understanding is an essential part of learning. By fostering intercultural understanding in the classroom, students are able to learn, and value, their own culture, language and beliefs, as well as others. At John Paul College in particular, students learn about, and engage with, diverse cultures in ways that recognise difference, creates connections and fosters mutual respect.

Intercultural understanding practice at the school

Rhiannen Gimpel is a Design Technologies Teacher and Vocational Trainer and Assessor at John Paul College. She has led the development of strong intercultural relationships between her College and Kantharalak Wittaya and Sunsime. These relationships involve students, staff and the broader school communities.

A variety of ICTs are used regularly to connect partner school classrooms. For example, students create pages on a Wikispace to exchange cultural information.

Cooperative curriculum planning between the partner schools is a feature at the College. For example, in Year 7, the curriculum partnership focuses on Community Design and Design Technologies. John Paul students have been working collaboratively and sustainably on projects to design and make products for students at Sunsime. These projects are intended for use as educational resources and as gifts for Sunsime students and staff. Year 7 students at Sunsime reciprocate by learning some English from their John Paul counterparts, with a focus on art and design to align with Community Design at the College. At Kantharalak Wittaya, the reciprocal focus is also on English and design, but with the added component of Home Economics.

At John Paul, Community Design is a subject that allows students to use skills from all Design areas – Home Economics, Visual Art and Applied Design (Manual Arts). This allows students to be highly creative when designing their project. In 2014, there were four Year 7 Design classes at the College (Home Economics, Visual Art, Applied Design and Community Design) – each class rotated every term so that all Year 7 students were able to complete a project in Community Design. In 2015, Community Design is being run as a unit in the second semester, which will enable students to create a project that allows them to use skills from Home Economics, Visual Art and Applied Design.

The Australian Curriculum view of intercultural understanding underpins intercultural learning at John Paul. Rhiannen utilises all organising elements and sub-elements of the general capability to plan for teaching and learning, and identifies content descriptions in the Australian Curriculum: Technologies that support intercultural learning. For example, in Year 7 Design and Technologies (Knowledge and Understanding), Rhiannen focuses on the following content descriptions:

- Examine and prioritise competing factors including social, ethical and sustainability considerations in the development of technologies and designed solutions to meet community needs for preferred futures (ACTDEK029)
- Investigate the ways in which products, services and environments evolve globally through the creativity, innovation and enterprise of individuals and groups (ACTDEK030)

Rhiannen elaborates:

In Design Technologies at John Paul College, students are working collaboratively and sustainably to solve problems, to design and make products for those in the local and global community. These projects are designed to cater for the specific needs of the community receiving the product. Students are constantly recognising different cultures and developing respect for diversity. They interact and empathise with others along the way, reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking personal responsibility.

The intercultural understanding focus within Community Design has enabled students at John Paul to successfully develop a product that meets needs of the students in Thailand and South Korea. Rhiannen has observed how students have enjoyed the opportunity to work collaboratively on a project that was intended for people in another country. The popularity of the subject/unit has spurred her to investigate ways to further develop Community Design at John Paul to strengthen intercultural learning and the College's cross-cultural relationships with Sunsim and Kantharalak Wittaya.

Rhiannen's BRIDGE and intercultural experiences at John Paul have been both personally and professionally rewarding. Her in-country experiences have helped her develop her intercultural competences as a teacher and enabled her colleagues to learn from her. They recognise clear transformations in her teaching, resulting from her overseas experiences.

Rhiannen reflects:

After completing two BRIDGE programmes, I have been able to plan for and implement effective teaching and learning processes to address intercultural understanding. By empowering my students to become active participants, they get involved in structuring their own learning, and designing units of work that are aimed at engaging them in real world situations. By working from relevant curriculum documents and embedding ICTs in my teaching, I have been very successful in making my lessons more engaging.

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Rhiannen now hopes to set up a reciprocal exchange programme with Sunsim and Kantharalak Wittaya, so that her students are able to gain firsthand experience of what it may be like to live the life of their South Korean and Thai counterparts.

Furthermore, Rhiannen describes how her intercultural experiences have enabled her to better understand and interact with her students in order to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Moving forward, she plans to continue to work with the BRIDGE partner schools with a focus on developing further activities and dialogue to promote greater understanding of student diversity. Rhiannen hopes that this understanding will enable her school and the partner schools to review and improve on how they are responding to students' needs, particularly from a cultural perspective.

On a broader school level, Rhiannen describes her College as a learning environment in which all members have the opportunity to reach their potential of living a fulfilling life and of getting involved. It is a place that is built on mutual respect and hospitality, which extends to people of all cultures and faiths. The College's commitment to BRIDGE is a prime example of its commitment to cross-cultural engagement and understanding. The John Paul International College was opened in 1997 to prepare and support international students for their studies in Australia. There is a strong focus on student welfare in addition to academic success. Its programmes are intended to develop students' learning as well as English language and intercultural skills so as to enable a smooth transition into education in Australia.

International students receive English language tuition, academic and vocational counselling, and assistance with homestay and private accommodation. Their presence at the College adds to the rich variety of intercultural experiences that all students can access.

John Paul also runs annual study abroad and student exchange trips to its partner schools. Prior to their trip, participating students are required to study the language, literature, history, geography and culture of the country they intend to visit. Whilst in country, they participate in collaborative activities with students and/or teachers in that country. Upon their return, students are asked to reflect on their experiences, in particular those that inhibited or supported the development of their intercultural understanding.

Rhiannen now hopes to set up a reciprocal exchange programme with Sunsim and Kantharalak Wittaya, so that her students are able to gain firsthand experience of what it may be like to live the life of their South Korean and Thai counterparts. She believes that by providing students with authentic intercultural experiences—face to face or virtually in the classroom—they will be able to develop an insight into the thoughts, feelings, motivations and behaviours of people from other cultures.

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What Works 9

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