

Broward Students React to On Common Ground

Jean Cary's advanced ESOL class at Nova Community School was alert and excited in anticipation of the weekly session of On Common Ground. Jean helped students focus on the episode's objectives and then went over unusual vocabulary and expressions, eliciting prior knowledge: "the third degree" was someone's inquisitive spouse; "scapegoat" exemplified an incident when someone was blamed for spreading gossip about a friend...

While the "technicians" worked on adjusting the VCR, I had a chance to ask general impressions about previous viewings. Everyone had a favorite, and the most vocal students were anxious to explain. "I liked "For the Greater Good" because it seemed so real. It could apply to any city in the world," said Viviana Baner (Argentina). " I liked it because of the human side: the father and son relationship was nice," said Judith Giras (Israel). "I like episodes with action, but we have a difficult time relating the story to the history," said Judith. "I am not sure about the violent parts," said Argenero Acevedo (Colombia).

Soon it was time to tune in to "Collision Course Part I." Immediately, the students were riveted by the turn of events. The personal emotion was evident in their facial expressions as the anti-immigrant speech was delivered, The students did not seem to have any difficulty in following the complex story lines: the company lays off that affected the Mathews family, the shocking shoot-out at the bus terminal, and the manipulations of Clay Sanford. The discussion that followed was intelligent and perceptive. "How far can the freedom of speech go?" "It is not okay to shove and push," but Judith asked, "Is it alright to hurt people with words?"

After the general discussion focusing on the issues and the story line Jean had the students work in groups to complete the "Remember the Story" activities. It was great to witness the newly acquired language reaching new limits in genuine

efforts to communicate. The concepts and the specific plot inspired the students to take risks in order to express their opinions. During the coffee break, Nimik Atmadji (Indonesia) broke away from her shyness to tell me "Something is bothering me. Why was it okay for the man to speak like that? He caused chaos! You see." She explained, "in my county he would go to jail!"

The general consensus was that On Common Ground help them to improve their ability to communicate in the English language. They said that going over the vocabulary and discussing the main issues first, was helpful in understanding the dialogues. The general discussions and the group work give them the opportunity to expand their use of the language orally and in writing, because the topics hold their interest. Finally the individual reports as expansion activities provide students with the opportunity to shine!

Jean has fifty students enrolled in her advanced/academic ESOL class, representing fifteen countries. Even during the week before the holidays there were close to thirty in attendance. Their professions range from medical doctors, dentists, child psychologists, teachers, flight attendants, advertising agents, and businesspersons, to a pastor of a Christian Korean Church and a young man who lives in a Buddhist temple.

But On Common Ground is also being successfully implemented throughout Broward County with less diverse student populations. Teachers of intermediate and advanced levels report favorable reaction by most students. One teacher who regularly schedules On Common Ground on Thursdays noticed that student attendance is normally higher that evening. The adult themes and relevancy to students lives are viewed as the main motivation for lively discussions of controversial issues.

Broward Students React to Crossroads Café

Crossroads Café continues to be a favorite series. Broward students and teachers have grown fond of the likeable characters. Even students in lower levels can participate in the activities and conversations inspired by the every day situations. Patricia Peabody is amazed at the range of ideas generated by her Knox Village ESOL group. Knox Village is a well established retirement community in Broward. The ESOL class consists of certified nurses assistants, orderlies, dining room workers and even a Uruguayan bus driver. Participants are mostly Haitian and their English ability varies greatly between oral and reading/writing skills. The class meets three times a week and Ms. Peabody uses Crossroads Café as the core of her instruction. This is what she says about the program:

Without a doubt, Crossroads is the best vehicle for prompting authentic student communication that I have ever found. My students have strong feelings about many of the issues that arise in the series, For example, Worlds Apart, the third episode, was a very hot button topic in my class. Rosa, the chef, has a dream of owning her own restaurant in the U.S. She also has a very handsome boyfriend who arrives from Mexico to propose marriage. Rosa does not want to leave the United States. In my class, this boiled down to who makes the important decisions, the man or the woman. They all agreed that she should marry this wonderful man because marriage is more important than a career, but there were about four different opinions on how to solve the problem of where to live. One woman insisted that she should marry Miguel first and then persuade him to stay in the U.S. AFTER the wedding. When I used the expression, "he is a good catch", no one had heard it before, but they knew immediately what that meant, and then, throughout their conversation, they used that phrase repeatedly to much laughter from the other students.

The reason this was such a good conversation is that we had the discussion before I let them see what Rosa finally did. One Haitian woman was adamant that she would not go back to Haiti for anything, no matter how "good a catch" the man was. The others really took her to task for being stubborn. Then I showed them the rest of the video and she felt justified in her opinion because Rosa called off the wedding. They left the classroom still arguing about

the issue. Many thought Rosa had made a huge mistake. I was glad when the class was over because the students want the teacher to take sides and announce the "right" decision. I would not touch that one with a ten foot pole!

Ms. Peabody uses the Photo Stories to introduce each episode. She assigns one picture frame to each student. In addition to speaking the lines in the bubbles, the student has to describe what is happening in the picture. He says for example: "Jess is sitting at the counter in Crossroads Café and he is talking to Katherine. Katherine looks very sad, Jess says, " ..." and Katherine answers " ..." This procedure has eliminated the long pauses that happened when people had to be prompted when it was their turn to read. Another plus in this method has been that students have learned to correct themselves and their classmates on the pronunciation of the word "says." English learners typically pronounce the word with a long "A" with an "S" added because that is the logical thing to do. It is very hard to get them to correct to "sez". The word now has to be used in almost every picture they read so it has become a class routine for everyone to call out "SEZ!" "JESS SEZ!" when a reader mis-pronounces it.

"We spend a long time on the Photo Series," Ms. Peabody explains. "I feel that the Photo Stories are the key to the success of the lessons. I also give them a short vocabulary list of words to listen for in the video. When the video is playing, they will call out when they hear one of those key vocabulary words."

Ms. Peabody likes the fact that the Photo Stories are just the story outline and that there is so much more in the actual video. Everyone, even the lowest level student, can follow the action, but the higher level students have some surprises in store that arouse their interest in seeing the video more than one time.

The students themselves express their opinion about Crossroads Café .

Irma: "We need to know all these things - how it is in the United States."

Michael: "This is good English for us"

Phyloria: "It seems like real life is happening and then you know that a problem is coming and when it does... well, that's when you don't know what you are going to do, but you have to keep going. I like talking about everyone has these problems that make you worry, like if you should let your kids work when they are in high school. I think school is the most important thing but I think Henry is a very smart boy who can do both."

Corine: "This movie is very interesting because after we read the pictures, then we can understand what the people are saying."

Amarante: " I like these stories. They have funny parts and sad parts. I think the part where Jamal didn't tell the truth to his friends was a sad part, but he was sorry for what happened and then it was OK. Everyone feels sad like that sometimes, like your job should be better,"

Beau: "Oh, this is really, really, good English I am hearing and I like it very much. I want to know all the English."

Manny: "Pronunciation is the most important thing. Just because you know a word, if you don't speak it right, then what good is that? all the time we find new words and then we practice saying the words the right way. This is how I want to practice my English."

Patricia Peabody says that all her students identify good pronunciation as a top priority for attending the class. However, the lively involvement in the topics lead naturally to much needed reading and writing practice in the Workbooks. Overall, Crossroads Café has provided her with an integrated approach to instruction with a multi level and diverse student population.