

## Article

### **COMMON GROUND: a video project on language and culture**

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#### ABSTRACT

The 'Common Ground' project is a set of video materials in which international students report on aspects of British life. A rationale is provided for focusing on the broader understanding of life in the host community and an outline given of 'active viewing techniques. Colleagues are invited to use the videos, which are housed on the ISEJ site, and to collaborate in the project by sharing materials related to the 'broader experience.'

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#### Introduction

'Common Ground' is a video project which aims to support international students in gaining a broader experience and understanding of life in the U.K. The videos were originally produced for visiting and exchange students at the University of York, attending a degree module, 'English Language / British Life.' The module focuses on language skills and cultural awareness, and aims to encourage participation in the host community. The materials have, however, also been used successfully with other learner groups, for example on induction classes on a Pre-sessional programme.

They are a series of mini-documentaries on different aspects of British life, for example, industry, agriculture and the environment. International students play a central role in the films as reporters and presenters, thus providing a 'visitor's eye view' of Britain. Although teaching staff selected the situations to be filmed, the student presenters were given free rein to ask questions and investigate aspects that interested them. All videos were shot on location, e.g. one about the countryside was made in collaboration with a hill farmer in Snowdonia. The focus on students' responses to this kind of direct experience, it is hoped, gives the films credibility with peers in class and an overall 'authentic' feel.

#### Why the 'broader experience?'

It might be asked whether international students are sufficiently interested in 'life and culture,' to justify a language centre running a degree module or producing such resources. However, the 'broader experience' is certainly very much part of the agenda on exchange programmes such as Erasmus.

"Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen. In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students' employability and job prospects." (Erasmus 2015)

Anderson et al (2010) argue that community engagement is vital for international students' sense of well-being and in their transition to the working world. Such engagement provides an opportunity to 'prove oneself, learn new skills, and gain experience' (p. 1). Indeed the emphasis on the wider student experience is not restricted to visiting students and has been taken up by the Higher Education Academy, many individual universities and, of course, professional groupings like ISEJ.

### **Why video?**

Digital technology has made the production and sharing of high quality video accessible to the wider community, including those engaged in education. The medium enables language learners to explore how words are embedded in a cultural context by showing setting, body language and unfolding action and relationships. Visual and audio clues can be used to anticipate content and pre-teach vocabulary. Using the content sparingly in short sequences and focusing on particular items through, for example, freeze-frame allows plenty of opportunity for an active response from learners in class. The availability of the video in a streaming online format enables learners to return to them in their own time for consolidation or extension activities.

The specific aim has been to enliven broad cultural themes, such as social class or heritage, by bringing into the classroom real life instances. Such 'glimpses' stimulate interest that can then be followed up through more conventional methods. For example, on 'English Language / British Life,' the course book, 'British Cultural Identities' by Storry and Childs was used to give a broader framework of understanding. Although the videos (and the module) focus on situations in the UK, these are used as a springboard for learners to compare practices in their own cultures through discussions and project work that place the UK experience in an international context.

### **What has been the feedback?**

In one class, an average of more than 7 out of 10 learners agreed strongly with these statements:

- The videos give an insight into British life.
- They help develop listening skills.
- They are a good stimulus for discussion.
- They are interesting.

A colleague in the ELT publishing industry made this comment on one of the films.

'The key is that it's authentic, and it covers slightly unexpected topics ... I also like the fact that international students are interacting in the video to add to the authenticity and realness of the context. There's already a natural script in place. ..There's also the added dimension of regional accents, which is important for diversifying listening types... Plus, now I've found out about the role of alpacas as fox deterrents, which is really interesting!'

### **What now?**

Common Ground has been a small-scale project, though it has acted as a significant supplement and stimulant for more than one course at the University of York. There have,

however, been other more ambitious projects in this area. The Erasmus ‘Citizen Reporters’ resource (at Home in Europe) makes an interesting comparison. This is a website featuring over twenty films shot in countries throughout Europe, mostly in languages other than English, though subtitles are available. It is a formidable and impressive body of work, produced by a professional media company on an EU budget. However, given the increasing flexibility of digital technology, there is no reason why ordinary members of the ELT community cannot produce materials of sufficient quality and, more important, originality and relevance, to justify their work being shared with the wider professional community.

The response to the ‘Common Ground’ materials, both by learners and other professionals, has certainly been sufficiently positive to encourage the makers to share them more widely as ‘open resources.’ They are thus being made available on ISEJ for other practitioners to use freely under a Creative Commons licence. Colleagues who also have an interest in language, culture and the wider ‘student experience’ are invited to participate in this venture by sharing their own materials and skills on ISEJ on a similar basis. Linking an article in the Journal to practical resources, as has been done here, would be a stimulating way of relating theory to practice and of showcasing innovation taking place in universities in the UK and, perhaps, beyond.

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