

Student article

Learning and understanding in a multinational environment over lunchtime

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This article introduces a lunchtime meet-up activity organized through the website <http://nottingham123.com/>, which has provided special opportunities for international students to talk with native students informally and moreover to enhance integration among different cultures. This is an important system that can help students to solve problems with study and life. As a Chinese student, I am studying at Nottingham Trent International College (NTIC). I have already participated in this kind of lunch party many times. So, I will share my personal experience during and after attending these meetings.

This activity is organized by students in a specific forum of the website <http://nottingham123.com/>. Any student can publish their topic and decide the activity time. Five to six students meet and eat at a table and everyone has an opportunity to organize the discussion. The initial idea was to encourage overseas students to chat together in order to help non-English speakers to improve in both speaking and listening. Now it has been enriched in a broad way, for example, it helps international students to get a better understanding about local culture, rules, and norms. It helps socializing and enhances the interaction and communication between overseas students and home students.

My personal experience of involvement in the lunchtime activity is incredible. To be precise, I think the activity is helpful and efficient in terms of solving problems for overseas students as it is a student-led activity. As a new person in Nottingham, the most important and desirable question is how to arrange one's life here. During the first week, without any embarrassment and worry about languages I spent almost 50% of lunchtimes in sitting at a table with Chinese students. After talking with Chinese students here, I found that the majority of information I got related to living in Nottingham and further afield, for instance, where I could go shopping; which bar offers the best cocktails; attractions and activities which cannot be missed in Europe and so on.

Most importantly, the groups shared some valuable tips for a Chinese student studying in the UK. Specifically, compared with students here, in China it is quite easy for students to get a pass in terms of writing coursework as copying without citation is not considered plagiarism in China. However, in the UK students must never use source material without citation. Plagiarism is not allowed in any academic writing, but paraphrasing with citation can be used to avoid plagiarism. This is important because the academic writing coursework may account for a great proportion of course assessment. The second point I learned is that during lectures, the teacher can be interrupted with a reasonable question or different opinion.

In terms of academic writing, I have acquired information from another perspective. Apart from avoiding plagiarism, the tip for getting high results is reading widely in advance and most importantly to manifest the unique and in-depth idea of a specific topic. Using

descriptive words without your opinion or idea is just like copying, which may lead to a fail in the coursework. The secret to get a good evaluation is to think and analyze critically.

Without a doubt, I have acquired sufficient information about Nottingham and some basic information about local culture from Chinese students. As for socializing, we need to pay attention to our behaviour. The first tip is to say sorry frequently. I learned from the forum that saying sorry is an effective way to stay away from trouble. The second tip is always to follow or imitate the behaviour of others and avoid acting in ways familiar to us in China. For example, when joining a queue in the UK, always stick to the position you are in and never try to jump the queue. In China it might be normal for people not to queue or to jump the queue, but that is not good in the UK.

During the following meet-ups, I was introduced to more and more other international students from different countries at the discussion table. In the beginning, I thought that it would be more difficult to chat with other students who speak a different language than Chinese. However, the warm welcome and encouraging words created a comfortable atmosphere to eliminate my nerves and worries quickly. I was very lucky to join the group, as the group mates were all kind. With great curiosity about everything related to other international students, their culture, life style, and individualism, I discovered many fascinating differences compared with my country. After talking with them, I found that, in turn, most international students share the same feelings and they want to know more about Chinese culture, for example, political issues, Chinese people's living conditions and habits.

In the lunch party, there are sometimes home students, who are generally invited by their international classmates. Based on the lunchtime discussions, I noticed that the difference between Chinese culture and British culture could stem from the differences between collectivist and individualist habits. During the practical lunchtime meeting, two aspects in particular showed these differences. One is the eating behaviour. For instance, most Chinese students often ordered and ate together, while other international students ordered and ate separately. The other is that Chinese students may ask questions without paying attention to privacy, while non-Chinese students significantly avoid talking about private matters.

As for social behaviour, Chinese students told me to say sorry frequently in terms of any unexpected situation, while home students show more detail and demonstrate reasons. The truth is when they keep saying sorry it does not always mean they really feel sorry but it is a polite way to reduce possibilities of conflicts and moreover to enhance relationships.

Personally speaking, the initial purpose of taking part in the event was to practise speaking and listening in English. Although I have studied English for more than ten years I still had problems using language in different situations. Because many Chinese teachers focus on writing and listening, Chinese students often lack skills in speaking and reading. This discussion activity could help other Chinese students – as it helped me – to communicate with other international and native students and gain further insight into British culture and study. As a result of the forum discussions, more and more students began to use English adroitly and naturally as well as quickly becoming integrated into the UK life.

In conclusion, the activity provides students from all over the world an informal platform to share information and enhance understanding across nations and cultures. Meanwhile, participants have received benefits during and after the lunchtime meetings. As for me, its greatest benefit has been to gain understanding of other countries' cultures. Also, apart from

acquiring important study tips and basic information on Nottingham, I am filled with confidence to communicate with other international students and to accomplish further study. Besides, I have made several friends during the activity, which has helped me to rapidly and efficiently enter into my new life in Nottingham and I hope to join related activities throughout my time in the UK and share my experience with others as well.

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