

the tutor

Fall 2004

Savvy Traveling: Volunteers Engaging With School Culture

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Journal Entry ... Day One ... Megacity High School

I'm on the bus now heading home. My hands are literally shaking as I write! What a day! I had no idea "going back to school" would be this hard! Things have sure changed in six years. Right off the bat I got asked for my identity badge by the VP. Maybe he thought I was a student. You'd better not be caught without your ID badge around here! And the kids—they're so loud and it feels like they're out of control. In the hall, I overheard a boy—I swear, he couldn't have been more than 14, saying, "Ooh, check her out—she's hot!" I almost jumped out of my skin. When I told Terry this (she's my supervising teacher) she just laughed.

"Try wearing something a little more conservative," she said. "Some of these kids may think you're fair game!" The nerve of her! Doesn't she know I'm an AmeriCorps member living in poverty? To top it all off, nobody, I mean nobody, had more than five minutes to spend with me today. Do they think I'm going to know what to do by osmosis? I ended up waiting around most of the day, trying to look like I knew what I was doing. Thank goodness, the school secretary at least gave me a map and helped me find the cafeteria. What a strange, strange culture this school is—I felt more at home when I was traveling overseas!

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What Is Culture?

Ask a group of people, *What is culture?* and you will probably hear as many answers as there are individuals in the group—values, language, music, food, style of dress, religious beliefs, body language, concepts of time, art, customs—the list of words we associate with *culture* is endless because culture is indeed all these things and more. Simply put, culture is the shared set of assumptions, behaviors, values, beliefs, roles, worldview, language, norms, and material objects that are common to and shared among a group of people. Culture is learned and passed on through customs and traditions. Culture is dynamic and influences and guides behavior. In turn, individual and group behavior influences culture.

Culture has both visible and invisible aspects. Some cultural attributes are easy to see; others are hidden and not so obvious. When we encounter both the subtle and not-so-subtle attributes of any new culture, we have the opportunity to learn a great deal about it—and about ourselves.

When thinking about culture, people often think first of nations or ethnic groups, but organizations and workplaces have their own cultures, too. Schools in particular have distinct cultures, characterized by specific values, language, rules of behavior and etiquette, and acceptable dress. Upon your initial entry into a school or out-of-school time program as a participant in national service, you may need many of the same strategies used by someone visiting a foreign country for the first time. Familiarizing yourself with these strategies ahead of time will help you move more seamlessly into the culture of your school or program site, work more smoothly with school and site staff, and—most important—support students more effectively.

In this issue of *the Tutor*, we outline those strategies, provide concrete tips and examples, and highlight some of the subtle differences among different types of education settings. Because so many national service tutors and mentors serve in schools, we have focused this article on the school setting. You will find, however, that all of the strategies are applicable to entering the organizational culture of any education program.

Steps to Learning a New Culture

Entering and integrating into the culture of your school or service site is like acclimating yourself to a foreign country. There are numerous customs you will need to learn and familiarize yourself with, dealing with everything from schedules to meeting protocols to communication systems. The steps below detail the process of learning a new culture and provide examples of what this might look like in the context of a national service education program. The remainder of this article will look in depth at some of the specific strategies—divided into three phases of integration—that you'll need to navigate this process successfully.

1. **Observation/instruction:** In this phase you are aware of and learning about a particular behavior, but haven't yet tried the behavior yourself. For example, you might observe a school staff meeting and learn how it runs before making a presentation yourself. Another example might be observing teachers and students: How are teachers addressed by children? How do they interact with students and set limits? What systems are in place for students? How do they line up? Go to the drinking fountain? Make the transition between classes?

2. **Imitation:** Now you try the activity yourself, although it may still require some effort and feel somewhat awkward. Perhaps you give an update at a staff meeting, but leave out a key point you want to make because you are concentrating so much on what you plan to say. We often take small missteps during this phase, but the practice pays off.
3. **Reinforcement:** Over time, you begin to feel more at ease. Whether it's chatting with teachers about curriculum in the break room or making your own decisions about what to work on with students, you feel more comfortable in the school environment. Teachers and staff around you applaud your progress and give you guidance when you make mistakes.
4. **Internalization:** Gradually, you need less and less reinforcement from those around you. You still have to think about what you're doing—*Did I sign in today? Did I remember to adjust my tutoring activities for the assembly schedule?*—but not as much as in earlier stages.
5. **Spontaneous manifestation:** Now you are a fully integrated member of the school community. Students and staff see you as a regular fixture, working with children, making meaningful contributions to staff meetings, and attending special events. At this stage, these and other daily routines simply come naturally. (Adapted from *Culture Matters*)

Phase 1: Pre-Entry Strategies: Preparation

Suspending Assumptions

As adults entering and learning a new culture, we often have to *unlearn* behaviors or attitudes acquired over a lifetime. Our own cultural beliefs and practices influence how we view the world, and we base our behavior toward others on our own cultural values and assumptions.

It's natural that you will go into your service assignment with many assumptions about schools, teachers, children, and the education system as a whole, but your work as a tutor or mentor will be most successful when you learn to put those assumptions aside. The first step in doing so is figuring out what those assumptions are. Take time to reflect on your own values and experiences. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What memories do I associate with schools and learning?
- What made me more or less successful in school? As a learner in general?
- What are my current experiences with schools and learning?
- What are my experiences working and interacting with children?
- What are my beliefs about education and schools?
- What beliefs or characteristics do I hold that will help or hinder me in my service?

By answering these and similar questions, you will begin to see some of the attitudes and biases that might affect your work as a tutor or mentor. For example, if your stomach knots up every time you think of your childhood struggles with math, it may have an impact on your work as a math tutor. Or if you were constantly being sent to the principal's office to be disciplined as a child, you may be especially intimidated when you meet the school principal and office staff. The questions above can help you unpack and reflect on memories and experiences that might hinder your service. They can also surface memories that might be helpful. Thinking about the one teacher who took time to give you special help with reading, for example, can be an inspiration to you when you feel challenged as a tutor or mentor.

Beliefs are an important part of who we are, and you may not be able—or want—to change all your beliefs about schools and education; nevertheless, being aware of and able to suspend judgments will help make your work as a tutor or mentor successful.

Managing Expectations Realistically

In addition to general assumptions about schools and working with children, you may have expectations about the specific endeavor you are about to undertake. The approach of the school year—and the service year—brings a great deal of anticipation. In some cases, you may not have set foot in a school building for many years, and feelings of excitement or anxiety can be considerable. For many, the start of the new school year signifies a clean slate, a chance to succeed, and for those working with children, an opportunity to make an impact on young lives.

It's crucial that you put those expectations in perspective to avoid disappointment and burnout. In an education program setting, that means keeping the following realities in mind:

- **Change takes time.** The personal rewards and pleasure derived from helping a child improve her achievement, attendance, attitude, and behavior are undeniable, but these improvements won't happen overnight. Building a relationship with a child or young person takes hard, ongoing work, and academic gains sometimes take even longer. Be patient with your student(s) and yourself.
- **Working with children can be delightful, but it can also be challenging.** Struggling students often experience feelings of frustration and anxiety that manifest themselves as uncooperative behavior. When students are difficult and none of your strategies seem to be working, it's important not to take things personally. Everybody has bad days. Often, just being available establishes a foundation for further work.
- **Teachers and other school staff members are busy folks.** Within their already tight schedules, they are often juggling curriculum planning, parent conferences, programming demands, staff meetings, and a variety of other responsibilities. They won't always have time to work closely and one-on-one with members and volunteers, so be flexible and look for ways to fit your needs for communication and support into their routines.

Phase 2: Initial Arrival Strategies: Observation and Imitation

Seeking Allies

Imagine yourself visiting a foreign country. From the outset of your journey, there are many things you need to know. As a national service volunteer in a new school culture, you are not just visiting a foreign country, you have a job to do there. You can gain the knowledge and support you need to be successful at your job by looking for and cultivating allies—individuals already familiar with the culture who will give you the insider help and information you need—in that dizzying maze of classrooms and halls. Here are some simple strategies for answering the questions: *Whom shall I ask? Who will give me the best answer to this question?*

The site supervisor: Your tour guide to foreign lands. In any national service education program, you will be working with a person designated to oversee your activities and collect and keep records of your work. Depending on the structure of your program, your site supervisor may be located where you actually report to volunteer (i.e., the school or out-of-school time site), or off-site at your sponsoring organization. Your site supervisor knows many things and will provide considerable guidance and orientation to your site. Occasionally, however, you will need to seek information and support from other members of the school community.

Beyond the site supervisor. There are many potential allies to discover. As you learn more about your service site (and have more questions as a result), you may need to get creative and seek out multiple informants to get the information you need. In the busy environment of the first weeks of school, attempt to find the right person, and then consider framing your request as follows:

Hello, I'm (your name), a new volunteer with (your program). I need some information about (topic of your question). Is this a good time to ask? If you don't know the answer, can you please tell me whom to ask?

Advocating for Yourself

You will need to be your own advocate to ensure that your integration into the culture of your school or out-of-school time program is seamless. Here are a few ideas to try:

- Identify allies and informants to guide you.
- Seek out opportunities to get yourself known—ask to make a short presentation about the tutoring program at a staff meeting, write a blurb for the newsletter, or make some announcements at the morning assembly.
- Ask to be invited to school- and program-sponsored trainings and professional development activities.
- Get your name on the staff phone list and make sure that you have a copy.
- Know your responsibilities as a national service member or volunteer so you can be clear with yourself and others about what is and isn't part of your service assignment.
- Volunteer for visible, but less desirable jobs for a small part of your time, such as playground monitor, lunchroom duty, coaching assistant, or evening activities host. This will win more friends and allies. Make sure, however, that these don't take too much time away from your primary assignment as a tutor or mentor.
- Find out where and when teachers and other staff take breaks. While you don't want to intrude on valuable break and planning time, look for opportunities to socialize and ask questions.
- When in doubt ... ASK! *How is ____ done in this setting? What is the appropriate way to do ____ here? Would you be willing to show me ____?*

Following is a guide to some of the key players in an education setting. Make a point of learning who these people are and introducing yourself at your first opportunity.

■ **School Secretary/Administrative Assistant.**

These invaluable staff members usually know everything about sign-in procedures for school visitors, volunteers, and parents. For safety reasons, every school has established procedures for letting non-staff adults into the building. Get to know the person with this responsibility in the school office, as he or she is the gatekeeper between the office and the hallways, and following such protocols will be an important part of volunteering. These persons can be calendar experts as well, and can usually advise you on how to check on established schedules as well as how changes are managed and posted.

- **Classroom Teacher.** Classroom teachers are your most valuable ally when it comes to the academic focus of your work as a tutor. They provide important information about student needs, strengths, and challenges, and can guide you in selecting tutoring materials and activities. Establishing a relationship with classroom teachers can help you align tutoring content with the classroom curriculum, providing valuable continuity and reinforcement for tutees. Letting teachers know that you are there to help and support their efforts will pave the way to a good relationship. (See *Collaborating With Teachers*, page 10, for more ideas on cultivating this important connection.)

■ **Reading Specialist/Title I Teacher.**

Every school with low income and/or underperforming students (especially Reading First grantees) has a person designated to track progress in reading achievement for students in the school. Ask in the office if there is a Title I or Reading First coach at the school, and make a note of his or her name. Often, this person is recruited to provide ongoing training and support to tutors. Look for an opportunity to introduce yourself and share what you are doing. As you get to know your tutee(s) and begin to look for specific strategies and materials, this person will be a good source of assistance.

- **School Counselors.** Sometimes called Grade Level Advocates, these individuals often have valuable information about specific student needs. They can share strategies and resources for meeting tutees' academic needs as well as for addressing behavior issues. Because they are very familiar with the school curriculum and the developmental needs of children of various ages, school counselors are valuable allies.

- **Facilities Manager/Custodian.** Custodians have a wealth of knowledge about facilities and how to make changes in room schedules, furnishings, maintenance and often, where to get supplies, as well. Knowing this person can be a great help—especially if you are stuck with a chair that hurts your back; seeking a special, quiet nook for tutoring; or dueling with others in a space-scheduling conflict.

■ **Parent Volunteer/PTA Officer.** Parents in a school can be very valuable sources of information, particularly if they have been in the building for awhile. If you have an opportunity to interact with parent volunteers, you might seek their interpretations of: school procedures and/or special terms; directions to rooms and advice about “who to ask”; information about cultural backgrounds and other community information that might help you in your work with tutees.

■ **Librarian/Media Specialist.** If you are looking for books to read to and with children, or special games and materials to build specific skills, this person can be an absolutely great resource. When you have a moment, learn where the library or media center is located, request a tour, and ask a few questions about how this person can help you.

■ **Family Resource Specialist.** This person works with students and their families, often helping them access additional support services that can help children be successful in school. He or she can provide useful information about students and their families. This person is an especially valuable ally if you are reaching out to families or engaged in family literacy efforts.

■ **Principal.** As supervisor of the entire operation, a principal may have established avenues for access, so learn these before approaching him or her. Usually, principals want to know and acknowledge volunteers, so seek appropriate opportunities to say hello. If an important matter comes up for discussion with the principal, clear the content with any pertinent stakeholders—your site supervisor, the classroom teacher, and others directly related to the issue, and ask for their input.

Allies in out-of-school time programs. Navigating education programs that do not occur during the school day, and/or occur at other community sites, will require you to be especially resourceful at establishing your information sources. Keep in mind the individuals listed above, but also look for the individuals who manage the following functions. Often, the same person may be responsible for two or more of these duties.

- Program coordination (*directing the overall out-of-school time program, potentially at multiple sites*)
- Site coordination (*managing activities at a particular out-of-school time site*)
- Curriculum development (*establishing program content*)
- Program resource management (*accessing books, computers, supplies*)
- Program sign-up and attendance (*recording adults and children present on any given day*)
- Program facilities management (*room setup and maintenance*)

The inside track: Finding that special mentor.

Whether you are working in or out of school, in any new educational setting it’s important to seek out your personal ally—someone who has been in the environment a good while, is respected by others, knows the culture, and has been especially generous about helping you learn what you need to know. Often you will find one ally in particular who is easy to approach, supportive, and kind. This person is an important mentor to cultivate. Consider expressing appreciation for mentors in various ways: thank them regularly for their support, ask what you can do to support them in return, and look for appropriate opportunities to socialize, or other ways to build your relationship.

Learning the Language of the School Site

Just as finding allies makes entry into a foreign culture easier, so does speaking the language. Think again about a visit to a foreign country and the advantages of speaking the native language. Beyond the practical aspects of being able to ask directions and how much things cost, there are many subtler benefits. When you speak the language you can bypass services specifically for tourists, for example, and gain access to better prices, more authentic goods, and a more “local” experience. As a national service tutor or mentor, too, learning some of the lingo will deepen and improve the effectiveness of your experience. Below is a brief discussion of two of the most common types of school-related jargon—school slang and professional terminology—and tips for deciphering some of the jargon you encounter.

School slang. What is a *spirit break*? *Blog time*? *The blue room*? *Fast track*? *Zero hour*? *A flower block*? In addition to policies and procedures, most schools develop their own language for managing the school day. Often these terms are intended to personalize the location and/or create some fun. Students may create their own slang for the school’s established language to create even more confusion.

Professional terminology. What is *Title 1*? *NCLB*? *An intervention*? *Phonemic awareness*? *IEP*? *AYP*? All professions establish a shorthand for talking about their work; in education, these terms can describe characteristics of learners, instructional strategies, legislative initiatives, and more. Often these terms are tossed about in acronym-form, and explanations and definitions can be long and complex.

Be strategic when seeking answers to professional questions. In a new environment, you don’t want to draw too much attention to what you don’t know, and many definitions will become apparent over time. However, if the school staff uses an unfamiliar term when providing you with directions, ask immediately, and request a follow-up resource to find out more: *Can you explain a little bit more about the NRP? Is there a good discussion about this I can read?*

Keep track of professional terms you don’t immediately need to understand in a notebook, and consider a range of options as you seek to learn more about the professional environment. You can ask professionals you know who are not at the school, peers who have more experience tutoring than yourself, or your most trusted ally at the school, as that person becomes apparent. And don’t forget about the Internet and library; it’s amazing what a little research on your own will turn up.

Keep a notebook. If you enter a school and hear a lot of confusing terminology, it can be helpful to keep a notebook, just as you might encourage your tutee to keep a notebook of new vocabulary he learns. Whenever you hear a term you don’t understand, write it down in your book. In fact, you can share this project with your tutee, and model an excellent strategy for building vocabulary.

Add the meanings of the words on your list as you figure them out. Your tutee might be an excellent resource for some of the meanings, especially slang expressions; for others, such as education-specific acronyms, ask an appropriate staff member.

Phase 3: Integration Strategies: Reinforcement and Internalization

Developing and Using Communications Systems Effectively

After you have adjusted to life in a new country, you begin to learn how to use local systems: public transportation, telephones, the mail, and systems for procuring the goods and services you need. Similarly, as you integrate into the culture of a school or out-of-school time national service program, you will find that there are many systems in place to help adults communicate with and about children and manage their transitions through the various parts of the school- and after-school day. Existing systems not only bring you up to speed on the culture around you, but can help you do your job as a tutor or mentor more effectively.

Many of the communication functions described below are handled electronically, and you may find yourself in a highly developed computer culture. If you consider yourself less than proficient with computers, this can be intimidating. Consider partnering with another tutor to navigate your way toward the information you need. If you don't have your own computer and you need time to get more comfortable, ask for access to a school computer at a time when it's not in use by others. Following is a discussion of the critical types of communication systems you may encounter.

Activity or site calendar: School calendars are a great way to find out about classroom schedules, field trips, special visitors, assemblies, athletic competitions, and family nights. Check the calendar frequently to keep abreast of changes, especially during periods of inclement weather. Especially in out-of-school time programs, where offerings rotate on a regular basis, the calendar or activity schedule provides essential information about where children are and what they're doing.

Attendance systems and policies: It's always a question, in tutoring programs: What will you do if your tutee is absent (or if you need to be absent)? If you serve in a program that requires a certain number of service hours—AmeriCorps or Foster Grandparents—and your tutee is sick or absent, ask your site supervisor for other assignments. There are surely other ways the school can use your help. And how should you report your own absences? Often, these questions will be answered in your orientation. If not, there's some investigating to do. Whatever your program policy, it's important that children know you are not there because of illness or other pressing matters—and not because you don't want to work with them that day.

Daily reports/tutoring logs: Most programs—whether school-based or in out-of-school time—will require you to keep track of your work with students. The amount and type of reporting required varies widely. Tutors may be asked to fill out a recordkeeping form to document each tutoring session. (It's a good idea to keep notes on each session with children—what books you read, what activities you did, what went well and what didn't, even if your program doesn't require you to do so.) Find out what's required of you and do your best to provide what's asked; programs rely on such detailed records to track accomplishments and share them with funders and other stakeholders. For one example of a recordkeeping form, visit www.nwrel.org/learns/resources/llap/RKF.pdf

Web-based assignment postings: Many schools provide a place for teachers to post homework assignments on the Web. If you are providing homework help, you can use this information to prepare for and carry out your work with tutees. Ask if such postings exist at your site and learn how to access them.

E-mail: Teachers and reading specialists can often be reached by e-mail and are eager to communicate about children's progress. As teachers are often swamped during school and program hours, e-mail allows them to reply when it's most convenient.

Collaborating With Teachers

Perhaps more than anyone else, teachers have key information about the individual needs of your tutee(s), and building a relationship with them will provide important support and feedback for your tutoring endeavors. Establish a communication system—look for a way to communicate with the classroom teacher about your ongoing work with a specific child. Some teachers like to pass folders back and forth, with specific forms and reports; others rely on e-mail; and other teachers prefer direct conversations within the classroom. Find out, through observation and questioning, what system will work best for the teacher(s) of your tutees. Whatever form it takes, focus your discussion on the teacher's goals for the child, specific skills to target, reading level and appropriate book selection, and games or activities that may be helpful.

Integrating Into School Culture: Teamwork

All schools have a variety of events, programs, and committees that can help you become integrated into the school family or team. As a national service member or volunteer, you are already serving the school in multiple ways. Look for ways that you can pitch in and connect with school staff and students in addition to your everyday role. Some ideas for making connections and becoming part of the school or program team follow.

Curriculum connections. There are many ways that both school and other educational sites create teams around the academic needs of children. You may learn that your site has a curriculum team that meets regularly to discuss individual student progress. Ask if you might sit in on these meetings. If the school uses a particular curriculum or program, ask to see the books or materials that children in the grade(s) you tutor are using. Schools also plan family events and other fun activities that promote learning. Find out how you can get involved in planning and executing these events.

Community connections. Many schools and out-of-school time programs engage students in service learning and other volunteer efforts in their surrounding communities. As a national service member or volunteer, getting involved in such events provides a great opportunity to promote and model a strong service ethic, both for students and school staff and community members.

Parent connections. If the focus of your program is on family literacy or outreach, there may be appropriate opportunities to meet the parents and/or families of your tutees. This can be an excellent connection that helps you discover aspects of your tutee's background, personal, and home life that will help you work together more effectively. Be sure to ask about the school's process for contacting parents and families—schools likely have a protocol for this.

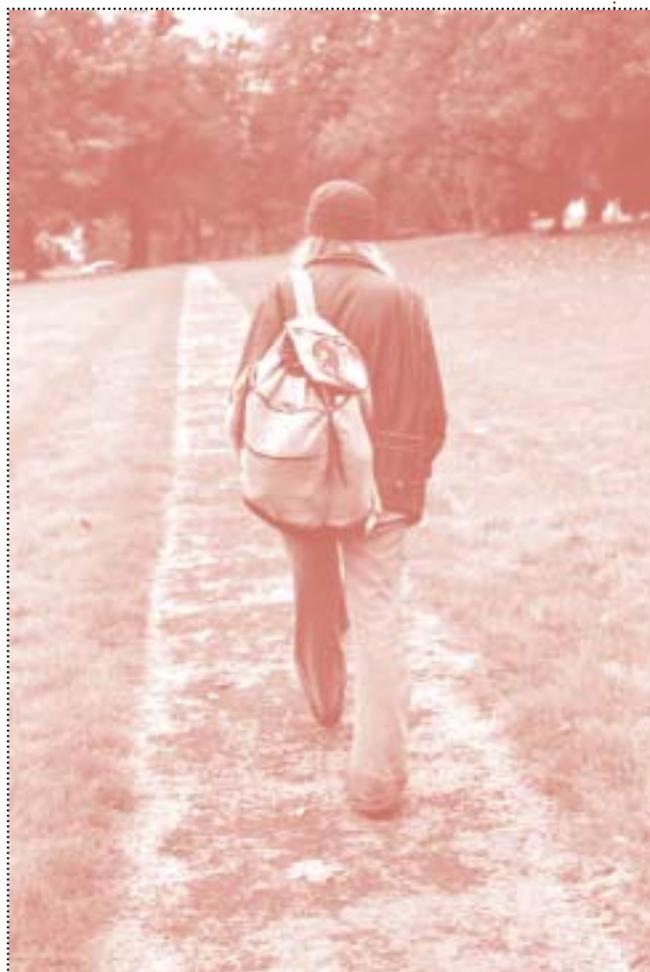
Journal Entry ... Thanksgiving Break

Wow! I can't believe it's already the end of November. I've been so swamped—getting to know the kids, trying to become a better tutor, and just learning my way around the school—that time has sure flown! It's nice to have a few days off to sit down and think about what I've learned. I just re-read my journal entry from the first day of my service and had to laugh! I sure felt lost. It's amazing how much better I feel now that I've made friends with some teachers and other staff and finally managed not to lose my ID badge at least twice a week. The funniest part is how intimidating the kids were. A couple of them have really tested me over the last couple of months, but they're basically all sweethearts ... You know, it's kind of crazy: I've been looking forward to this break for so long, but now that I'm away, I can't wait to get back to school next week!

Integrating into any new culture is seldom quick or easy. You may experience several days or even weeks of smooth sailing, only to hit a bump that makes you feel as though you'll never remember all the new rules and expectations. Slowly but surely, though, you will begin to feel more comfortable. As your culture shock wears off over the course of the school year, you will begin to realize what others around you already know: As a national service participant, you are an important member of the school community and your contribution to the school—and its dynamic culture—is invaluable.

Reference

Peace Corps Information Collection and Exchange. (1997). *Culture matters: The Peace Corps cross-cultural workbook*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved September 9, 2004, from www.peacecorps.gov/www/culturematters





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