

# Challenges in the Global Classroom: Perspectives of an American Science Editor

**Elliott Churchill**

## **Setting the Scene: “But I already have a dress”!**

I had been concerned about explaining to a group of trainees in an East African country about analyzing a proposed target audience by using the concept of that group’s values. Now, I was to visit with my young friend, Philip, at his mother’s home. He had been in the United States for academic training and had only recently returned to a position in his country’s ministry of health. We traveled for several hours on the bus to reach his mother’s rural home. She proudly showed me around her property—almost an acre of banana trees, a kitchen garden, and yam plants that produced monstrous potatoes. She had a donkey, some ducks and chickens, and a doe goat with twin young ones. Philip had brought her several gifts from America—some rope, a new hammer, some medicine for fungal infections of the chickens’ feet. Finally, there was a beautifully wrapped box, which he presented to her with a flourish.

“What is it, Son?”

“Well, open it and see, Mama”, replied Philip with a big grin.

After an interval of painstakingly removing the ribbon and tape so as not to spoil any of the paper, once again, “But what is it, Son?”

“Mama, it’s a dress like the American ladies wear.”

With a shake of her head, his mother said, “But, Philip, I already have a dress!”

“Yes, Mama, I know, but American ladies have whole closets full of dresses.”

“Now, Philip, you must have misunderstood. No woman can wear more than one dress at a time. I wear mine every day, and

then I take it off and wash it when I put on my nightdress, and I wear it again the next day. I won’t need another dress for 5 years or more.”

“But Mama . . .”

“Son, I tell you, you must have misunderstood. No woman would be so foolish as to let that much money hang in a closet when she could buy food for the goats or a plow to run behind the donkey.”

Since the day Philip’s mother explained it to me, I have stopped worrying about how to explain the concept of value to my colleagues in Africa. I now struggle to explain “value” to audiences in the so-called developed world.

## **Background: “You want me to go where?”**

My introduction to the global classroom came in the middle 1980s when, as the manager of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publishing office, I felt myself becoming stale and less than completely enthusiastic about my work. This coincided with my children’s having departed for universities in several states and the recognition that my laundering, chauffeuring, and homework skills were no longer required on a regular basis.

When I posed the problem of professional malaise to my supervisor, he inquired about what I thought I wanted to do instead of my current set of duties. My immediate response was “travel and teach”. Before I had come to CDC in the late 1960s, I had taught at the universities of North Carolina and Kansas and had loved the classroom setting. Economic issues led me to government service, and I suppose I had been yearning for the classroom ever since.

The next question from my supervisor was, “Would you be willing to go to Russia for the winter?” That stopped me in my tracks—but not for very long. I asked what I would be doing if I went to Russia

for the winter. He explained that CDC had recently had a request from the US Department of State to assist in Moscow as the government there prepared for the unraveling of the former Soviet Union. There was concern that information from their surveillance system would not be collected and disseminated in a manner that made it useful to policy-setters and decision-makers.

So I went to Russia for the winter and stayed on for the spring. In all, I had 7 months of intensive learning about how things could be accomplished in a system that was as strange to me as the language in which it was conducted. I met and worked with some wonderful people, although many were convinced initially that I was an agent of the US Central Intelligence Agency sent to cause them grief. That international assignment taught me a level of patience I had never before enjoyed, taught me to view surprises as possible benefits, taught me to take every easing of a task as a huge gift, and taught me to value my taken-for-granted Western freedoms of movement and speech as I never had before.

The Russian adventure, in which I assisted the Ministry of Health staff in Russia to set up a publishing office to disseminate public-health information to multiple target audiences, opened the door for similar assignments in 27 other countries. From there, the requests began to branch out a bit. “Well, can you teach our staff how to write an article for publication?” “Can you teach us how to do public-health advocacy?” “Will you teach us how to make effective presentations to our high-level legislators?” “How can we learn how to do a critical review of a report that is based on objective criteria instead of on how we feel about the author?” My stock response to all these questions was, “I will be glad to try.” And that led to the next stage of my journey into the global classroom.

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### **Building Relationships: “You DID come back!”**

My journey into the global classroom has continued to take place throughout the 1980s and 1990s and has placed me, by the early years of the 21st century, in a total of 93 countries as a representative of CDC. My students are usually professional staff in their countries’ ministries of health; most often, they are physicians, but some are nurses, economists, demographers, or health-education specialists. I am asked to conduct short- to medium-term courses (a range of 1 week to 3 months) in the general field of health communications (including surveillance for diseases, scientific terminology, public-health advocacy, publishing in the peer-reviewed literature, and the like) for adult students.

One of the things that I prize most highly about my experience in the global classroom is the knowledge that my trainees and I trust each other—to continue to have a connection, to continue to care, to continue to be willing to help. When I left Russia on that late spring day in 1985, I told my trainees that I would be back to work with them as soon as I could. They thanked me politely, but they indicated very clearly that they had heard such statements before and had never seen the speakers again. In 1987, I was able to return, with some equipment in hand and some funding for small but new publishing projects. They greeted me with great surprise and “You DID come back!” When I returned again in 1990, they greeted me with “We hoped you would be able to come back.” And by the time I returned to work with them again in 1992, they greeted me with “We’ve been waiting for you.” For people who have learned to expect little, and frequently have been given less, such faith goes beyond touching to the edge of the miraculous.

### **Using Stories as Learning Tools**

I believe the general subject in which I work lends itself to establishing rapport with my students, an important step in my effort to create a sense of community in the

classroom. One of the first things I do when I meet a new group of students in another country is to tell them some stories about myself and my family; about CDC, the US federal agency for which I work; and about other settings and people in the United States. The reason for this is to establish storytelling as one of the accepted reporting mechanisms in this class. I have never worked in a culture that did not have some sort of storytelling tradition, and most of my students are very comfortable with this kind of activity. Often, it allows them to use a story as metaphor to describe a situation or problem they would not wish to present to an audience as fact.

### **Establishing Rapport with the Trainees**

In the first few sessions of a class, I try to convey to the students my intention to have a relationship with them for as long as they wish it. That is, I will not simply be interested in them and their progress for the term of this course but am making a commitment to be a friend and colleague for the long term. This sort of commitment, of course, has its downside. On the average, I hear from former students at the rate of about 10 messages per month. Some of the messages are just “brag notes” to let me know about their recently published paper, their completed graduate degree, or their promotion. More often, they are requests for assistance with terminology or processes. I am always glad to hear from them. Particularly important in the international classroom, although certainly desirable in domestic settings as well, is learning the students’ first names and addressing them by them as often as possible. That presents a challenge, but it helps to convey the instructor’s connection with them, interest in them, and intention to remember them long after the course ends.

### **Using the Target Audience as a Tool to Learn about the Trainees**

Another device that helps me learn about the students in the early days of a course

is the introduction of tools for analyzing target audiences in terms of their values, fears, commitments, levels of understanding, and acceptance of health-related concepts. Often, I learn a great deal about the students’ values, fears, and other personal qualifiers in this process.

The audience analysis also provides the first of many opportunities to divide the class (typically 20 to 30 people) into small problem-solving groups that work on the assigned problem and report to the larger group. Each subgroup chooses a reporter for an assigned exercise, and no person is asked to report on two exercises in a row. Thus, every member of the class reports to the larger group more than once over the term of the course. That process, in turn, allows me an opportunity to provide positive responses and reinforcement to the problem-solving groups and to the individual reporters. One aspect of the feedback from me is commentary on the positive aspects of their efforts, and another is that I lead a round of applause after each small group completes its report. Initially, the rest of the class may be hesitant to join in the applause, but it has never taken more than one training day for all participants to be enthusiastically applauding each other’s efforts.

### **Integrating the Local Culture into the Classroom Setting**

Another strategy for building a sense of community and strengthening rapport among course participants and between course participants and me as course leader is to make note of the stories they tell on the first day of the course and build material from their stories into my illustrations and analogies in later sessions of the course. I also watch for gestures. Do the students in this county use their hands a lot or a little when they talk? Other clues about their cultural orientation are found in whether they make direct eye contact when they talk with another person or group. Do students speak assertively in conversation but lower their voices to near inaudibility when they respond to questions or make reports

## Global Classroom continued

in class? Do they stand when they report or ask me questions? (If they do, I make sure that I only sit down while they are working in their problem-solving groups.)

### Determining the Value of Individual vs Group

An extremely important key to success in the international classroom is determining whether the culture in which I am working places more value on the individual or on the group. For example, in the United States, we place great value on recognition for the individual. When a student reports on "What I Did on My Summer Vacation", he or she expects to give that report as an individual—and to receive rewards as an individual. In other cultures, however, students are extremely uncomfortable at being singled out for recognition. They do not mind representing their classroom group, but when they give reports they make it clear that they are representing the entire group and not just speaking for themselves.

### Identifying Comfort Zones

Functioning effectively in the international classroom includes identifying comfort zones of distance, eye contact, and the like. Also, in many cultures, people are also very uncomfortable with our Western predilection for directness. "Tell it like it is—no varnish, no subtlety" may be offensive to people whose cultural mores do not ever allow them to respond to a question with "No". The closest they can come to a "No" answer without being rude is to say "Yes, but. . . ." In some cultures, people smile or laugh when they are nervous or frightened.

This may be confusing to the Westerner, who assumes that the people are amused. In other settings, it is considered rude for a student ever to smile at or laugh about something said by an instructor. (That can, incidentally, be extremely frustrating for an educator who makes a huge effort to think of amusing anecdotes and stories to tell as ice breakers at the beginning of a course. The educator tells them in the most dramatic manner and is repeatedly disappointed when the students remain solemn and unsmiling.)

### Summary: "What kind of snake was it?"

In 2004, I was teaching in an open-air classroom somewhere in the developing world, with a lecture in full swing one morning, when two of my trainees, Solomon and Moses, got up hurriedly and left the room. Solomon had been carrying what looked like a bundle of cloth. I continued with the class, but during the midmorning tea break, I asked Solomon whether he was feeling all right. He responded with the ever-polite, "Oh yes, Madam." I said that I had been concerned when he left the classroom that he might have been ill—or that Moses might have been. "Oh no, Madam" was all I got. Then I asked what was in the bundle he had carried out of the classroom. Clearly dismayed, he responded, "Oh Madam, you weren't supposed to see that."

"Well, please tell me what was in the bundle."

"Oh Madam, it was a snake."

"A SNAKE! What kind of snake?"

"Er, um, ahem. A cobra."

"And you wrapped it up and carried it

out in your shirt?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Solomon, why didn't you say something? The rest of us would have helped you. You might have been bitten!"

"We were afraid you would go home."

I still cannot think of that conversation without having tears come to my eyes. Teaching in the global classroom continues to be a challenge. And one can make a mistake at any time. There are just too many lessons and too many settings for us to learn all the answers, even if we work in every country on Earth. However, the rewards can be even greater than the challenges.

Adult students in the developing world greatly appreciate our coming to be with them. After all, they are confident that we have willingly left luxury to travel to them. They are also eager to absorb and put to use the knowledge and tools we have brought them so as to improve their own lot and to contribute to the development of their country's intellectual and functional capacity. They prize, above all, the relationship they can develop with us. We are their contacts in the developed world—the people who will continue to care about them and their achievements long after the training course is over.

I recently received an e-mail from a former trainee in one of the countries of the former Soviet Union. He started his message with "You will be so proud. Your Vladimir has been promoted to be a Deputy Minister." He was right. I am so proud. 🌐