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Students from Wake STEM Early College High School and Suzhou North America High School present their Project-Based Inquiry assignment

# CONNECTING CLASSROOMS TO THE FUTURE

## Developing cross-cultural understandings through project-based inquiry

By **Hiller A. Spires, Marie Himes, & Erin Lyjak**

*W*e enter the classroom to the expectant chatter of 28 high school juniors. On the flat screen, a similar scene is taking place on the other side of the world.

Today, our Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) launches. Students from Wake STEM Early College High School (ECHS) in Raleigh, NC, and from Suzhou North America High School (SNA) in Suzhou, China, begin their collaborative research project comparing American and Chinese cultures.

*The distinctive chime of WeChat echoes throughout the space as students use their digital devices to chat with their global partners. By the end of our one-hour kickoff, student teams have agreed on a direction for their assignment and have developed a plan for carrying it out over the next six weeks.*

This scene played out last fall and will continue to be seen again and again as we develop cross-cultural connections with classrooms around the world through our PBI Global initiative. Here, we detail our project and its many benefits for students, and encourage fellow educators to consider similar initiatives this school year.

## What is PBI Global?

Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) Global ([pbi-global.com](http://pbi-global.com)) is a collaborative instructional strategy that connects students internationally through interdisciplinary projects that require them to follow five steps: ask compelling questions, gather and analyze sources, creatively synthesize claims and evidences, critically evaluate and revise, and share, publish, and act.

A team at North Carolina State University is facilitating these cross-cultural, inquiry-based learning collaborations among secondary students in North Carolina and China via the PBI Global framework. Since 2014, four schools have worked together. In addition to ECHS and SNA, students from Beijing Royal School in Beijing, China, and Centennial Campus Magnet Middle School in Raleigh, NC, have collaboratively investigated issues of water quality, cultural differences, coming of age, and international cooperation.

The iterative design cycle of PBI Global compels students to be self-directed and motivated, to develop evidence-based arguments, to creatively showcase their findings using digital tools, and to focus on the continuous improvement of their research, writing, and digital product. By conducting PBI Global with local and international peers, students must negotiate the dynamic nature of collaboration, pursue varied means of communication, and internalize diverse perspectives.

Students use a collection of digital tools in order to effectively

communicate, collaborate, and create during PBI Global, including:

- WeChat and Skype for discussing and planning in student teams
- Quip, Wikispaces, and Baidu for gathering, analyzing, synthesizing, and sharing research
- Prezi and Animoto for creating the culminating digital products

The capstone of every PBI Global is a showcase during which the students present their digital products in front of peers, teachers, parents, and community members. The showcases are simulcasted at partner schools so student groups present together in real time. Post-PBI Global, communication and collaboration among students have persisted. In fact, students at ECHS and SNA have created an international club that meets monthly to discuss and share cultural traditions, customs, values, and norms.

## Why use inquiry?

Inquiry is one approach to teaching and learning in a world that is exploding with information. In fact, teachers can use inquiry to support students as they delve into disciplinary content to provide a rich, nuanced learning experience. In our model, students do more than explore content; they use the tools of a discipline to understand claims and evidences and to create new knowledge as encouraged by the Common Core State Standards.

For example, the students from Raleigh and Suzhou collaborated to compare and contrast aspects of Chinese and American cultures. One cross-cultural team posed the question, “How do American and Chinese youth deal with academic pressure?” Through the five-phase PBI process, students gathered and analyzed a variety of sources on adolescents’ academic habits in the United States and China, including conducting cross-cultural surveys to generate original data. The team was particularly interested in investigating the impact of leisure activities on student stress levels, finding that American students’ academic schedules afforded them more opportunities to engage in extracurriculars. Conversely, Chinese

students tended to deal with academic pressure by devoting additional time to their studies.

Students from both countries were intellectually and emotionally engaged as they synthesized their data and created cohesive written and digital products.

“This is basically a teacher’s dream to get to see students really be on fire for learning,” says ECHS teacher Andrea Gambino.

Ella Hu, a guidance counselor at SNA, added, “Student curiosity was sparked as they took ownership of their learning through purposeful choices and knowledge creation.”

With PBI Global, students engage in authentic, intellectual work so their products have value within school as well as in their everyday lives.

## Furthering cross-cultural understandings

At the heart of inquiry is the quest to understand and construct knowledge. With PBI Global, students are striving to understand their topic as well as multiple cultural perspectives. This dual purpose requires students to negotiate meaning intellectually, culturally, and personally.

“Since we are born in different cultures, we have different understandings, so it’s important to come to know each other,” says Theo, a senior at SNA.

The PBI Global process encourages students to move beyond perceived differences and make connections on a human level. Juan, a junior at ECHS, remarked, “I’m on this side of the world, and he’s on the other side. It’s really opened up my view on people.”

This evolution in students’ cross-cultural understandings is what leaders in education, business, and government hope to see in the next generation of young adults.

“This is what we wish for every student—to have this kind of collaboration across the globe,” says Tricia Willoughby, North Carolina State Board of Education member. “The most important things that happened were the relationships that developed. The path to world peace is through these relationships, and it’s one by one by one.” ■