

Acceptance remarks from International Educator of the Year Kyle Tong

Thank you to the Columbus Council on World Affairs for this honor and more importantly for your work. We are a nation that is quick to engage the world, yet does not understand it. Through your leadership in creating and evoking dialogue on global issues and concerns, you provide an outstanding model for problem-solving, positive change, and global understanding for the corporate, government, and educational communities. Your work is much needed and appreciated.

Thanks are also in order to The Columbus Academy, and in particular to our Headmaster John Mackenzie, for providing the Central Ohio community with an Independent School option that is second to none. In your leadership you allow your students and faculty the intellectual freedom to take risks, explore the road less traveled, and simply dream.

When I mentioned to my father that I would be receiving this award he became quite excited. After several moments he gathered himself and responded rather solemnly... “Kyle”, he said, “this award was highly deserved...by someone else”... Well, in spite of your ringing endorsement Dad, since I’m standing here, I thought I would say a few words about the concept of “Global Literacy”.

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My primary and secondary formal education was largely devoid of global content. In elementary school I heard stories of Chinese boys and girls sleeping above hot bricks to stay warm. Another tale told of an Andean child traveling from the mountain-terraced field to her village on the back of a llama. These sparse mentions were treated as artifacts which were

ancient...unreal in their portrayal and their relevance. Museum pieces— unchanging, static, and locked in time.

Little was different in Middle and High School. I began to study a language, French, but it was treated largely as a mind exercise without much discussion of the users of this language throughout the world. Ninth grade World History focused upon the ancient Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, and Egyptians...again, artifacts and edifices of a closed past. There was some mention of non-western societies in other history classes but it was always in relation to how it affected “the west” and more particularly the United States. Observation without understanding...this was an education of Global illiteracy.

I was, however, fortunate— for I had an informal global education. It was a gift forced upon me at the dinner tables of my parents and grandparents. My father’s family was an international one. My Dad was born and spent his formative years in the Philippines... his first six years as a carefree imp in tropical Davao and the next three and one-quarter years as an internee with his family in a Japanese concentration camp. For the Tong family, global issues were immediate and life changing. Fortunately for them, their experience was very trying yet had a happy ending. They returned home to the States with a unique global perspective...which they eventually brought to my dinner table.

Over the years the Tongs regaled their family’s next generation with tales too numerous to mention here. But they all had these common themes— the interconnectedness of the human experience— true communication provides understanding, innovation, and prevents human conflict— and in discovering our differences we will realize our commonality.

I treasured these moments and stored them away. I had been given a tool, a mechanism with which to understand the world. It was a seed that was able to germinate when provided with the energy of college and a career in education. This is a gift, delivered at the dinner table, that I

have tried to pass on.

As an educator I have strived to provide similar “seeds” for my students. I feel that these valuable assets **can** and **must** be provided to our young people in order for them to achieve literacy and have the full potential to be thoughtful, articulate, and informed global citizens.

I feel that there must be **three** priorities in the realm of Global Literacy:

First. We must provide high quality, vigorous, and energetic Foreign Language instruction. The primary purpose of this discipline is not a mental exercise but rather a process that gives us a window into the soul of another culture. As a child, my father spoke Visayan, an obscure language of the island of Mindanao. It has limited use in global communication but it is invaluable as a tool for understanding the Filipino experience. An additional benefit of learning a second language is that it encourages empathy for others undertaking that important task in our own country. Millions in our country are learning English as a second language. This understanding will help to engender respect and lessen disdain. This respect is earned from a common experience, language learning.

The second area of focus should be in providing an innovative and evocative K-12 course of study in global history and culture. This need not be discrete and separated but rather integrated and woven like a tapestry throughout the curriculum. The world’s greatest beauty is in its infinite diversity and complexity. Too often in education we tend to simplify and stereotype... seeking understanding through the least common denominator. An example of this simplification and stereotyping is the story told in the classroom of my youth of the first European contact in the Americas. The narrative that was related made a singular hero out of the pioneering Columbus and the conquerors who followed. At the time, I felt confused by this story.

I wanted, and should have *demanded*, more. If Columbus discovered the New World, why was it not named after him? If European “commoners” were seeking liberty, why did the new arrivals institute slavery? These questions could not be answered in the calcified tale presented to us. Fortunately, Columbus’ narrative is relayed in more complexity to our students today—— the tale includes courtly intrigue in Spain and the inadvertent biological genocide in the New World.

Students are fascinated by the seemingly insolvable riddle. How did a relative handful of Europeans defeat millions of people in the so-called New World? Is peace possible in the Middle East? Critical approaches such as these allow students to engage in diverse, deep, and impassioned responses. This approach is an ocean away from the monochrome presentation of my childhood. Our students *want* to take on today’s complex and seemingly intractable problems. If we present them in a vibrant, challenging way, our charges *will* respond with total commitment. We will be providing the critical tools for these apprentice scholars to solve the puzzles that vex our contemporary world.

Lastly, and this is oh-so-important because of its immediacy— and the far-reaching and potentially permanent consequences of our ignorance— is the need for our students to become fluent in the language of sustainability. Sustainability of our global community should not be seen as trendy, for it is a necessity for survival. In all studies of life— biology, history, culture, and the environment— we speak of cycles necessitated by finite resources—— limited energy and potable water— poverty and want causing suffering and disease— and increased consumption resulting in an ever-increasing pile of non-biodegradable waste are examples of cyclical certainty.

Yet in one discipline, economics, we talk only of growth, based on the belief that

increased consumption will only *benefit* the community. It is imperative that we provide new language and discourse. With global realities we need— as educators and as a community— to teach to the future, not to the present or past. Our work and our legacy will be a moot point if we do not transition from a species motivated by perpetual growth into a community of cyclical sustainability. This is an aggressive position, yet with this global literacy, we would be placing it in the best of hands, those of our children.

Global Literacy need not be random and dictated by the vagaries of the dinner table. With an aggressive, concerted, and communal program in our schools we can turn our children's global literacy from dinner-time conversation into local and global *fluency*, and *action*.

Thank you so much for your time and attention.