

CHAPTER 6

INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS' CROSS-CULTURAL TEACHING STORIES

A Tragic Comedy

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This article presents a framework based on the genred stories of Tragedy (where one is a captive or victim of uncontrollable social or personal factors) and Comedy (where one is a utopian who embraces an ideal community of teaching and learning). This framework is used to analyze four international teachers' cross-cultural teaching experiences. The analyses inform how international teachers' cultural backgrounds impact their accounts and resolutions of cross-cultural teaching struggles for moral sensitivity, reflection and imagination (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). Pedagogical implications are raised, as are future research possibilities to increase international understandings.

Most research on international teaching assistants (ITAs) or international associate instructors (IAIs) focuses on their common challenges in foreign cultures, including their lack of English proficiency (Luo, Grady, & Bel-

lows., 2001; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009) and insufficient vocabulary (Alberts, 2008). Research also suggests that accents, organization of class presentations, use of practical examples, ways of handling questions, and teacher confidence all have an impact on how their native speaking students perceived the quality and clarity of teaching (e.g., McCalman, 2007; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). Studies have often concluded that international teachers generally needed to know more about their host country educational systems in order to display “appropriate” communication skills (Alberts, 2008; Luo et al., 2001), pedagogical skills (Luo et al., 2001; McCalman, 2007), and pedagogical content knowledge; and that students could do better to acknowledge the international perspectives of teachers (Alberts, 2008). Research-based recommendations include implications at the microlevel of instruction (e.g., self-assertive presentation, provision of handouts, and etc.) and the level of teacher development (e.g., supervision, hands-on workshops and microteaching) (e.g., Alberts, 2008).

The above research on IAs or ITAs, however, fails to recognize the importance of moral, emotional and spatial-temporal dimensions of how teachers maintain and negotiate their identities through narrative inquiry (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Williams (2007) research is exceptional in that he advocated exploring the ITAs’ teacher identities in specific contexts using narrative research. He found that the ITAs adopted different roles and perspectives on teaching, needed to negotiate with their students, coped with cultural differences, and held different degrees of investment in teaching due to different career visions. Yet this important work only shows the ITAs’ perceptions of their teacher roles in general rather than exploring the subtle nuances of each participant’s teaching plots.

The temporal and cultural aspects of teachers’ identity become particularly important in cross-cultural encounters because “cultures do provide specific types of plots for adoption by their members in their configuration of self” (Phelan, 2000, p. 290). For instance, many scholars have observed that Asian students (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hsieh, 2006; Yang, 1993), preservice teachers (e.g., Spooner-Lane et al., 2009; You & Jia, 2007), or teacher educators (e.g., Wang, 2004, 2006) have difficulty adjusting to the Western culture, most likely because of their collective culture (diligence, harmony, and respect for teachers) as juxtaposed to individualism (egalitarianism, self-assertion, and confrontation) (e.g., Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Scollon and Scollon (1999) also speculate on the Asian Confucian discourse (teachers as role models, virtue learning, written rhetorical appreciation, and learning for self-improvement or understanding) as juxtaposed to a Socratic one (teachers as midwives, dialogic reasoning, oral argumentation training, and independent thinking).

Although generalities, these value differences may lead Asian teachers to grapple internally with their own interpretations of silence, softness, cooperation and a sense of learning community, as well as externally with students' disrespect for teachers, entitlement for negotiation over grades, or lack of hard work.

Yet pigeonholing the West and the East has been criticized for its essentialism (e.g., Kubota, 1999), and so recent narrative studies have attempted to unfold immigrant teachers' cross-cultural teaching stories (e.g., Guo, 2006; He, 2002a, b, c; Li, 2005; Wang, 2004, 2006). For instance, He (2002a, b, c) has described how she was acculturated to Western culture from China, recognized the differences between the Western culture she had imagined and the one she experienced, appreciated and questioned her native culture as she tried to be a part of the West, as well as being caught in-between cultures. Elbaz-Luwisch (2004) has addressed how immigrant teachers in Israel illustrated their cross-cultural struggles via different plotlines (e.g., home, battle, suffering, and journey). These immigrant teachers all felt as if they were "strangers" or "fake" to new cultures and thus were required to prove their teaching qualifications. Using postmodern feminism, Wang (2006) proposes "a third place"—a space that acknowledges all students and teachers as "strangers" to embody "provocative and engaging pedagogy" (p.124).

Based on Dilthey's concept of narrative unity (see Habermas, 1968/1971) and White's (1973) classification of narrative genres (i.e., romance, comedy, tragedy and satire), this article specifically discusses how four East Asian doctoral student instructors accounted for their cross-cultural teaching struggles in relation to their self-identification in their teaching roles by using either or both *tragedy*, in the sense that they portrayed themselves as if victims or captives to uncontrollable social or personal forces (when facing teaching incidents), and *comedy*, in the sense that they harmonized their grappling with such forces by projecting the vision of an idealistic utopian community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Like many narrative researchers (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Clandinin, 2007), this study assumes a narrative self as one of the foundations of cultural sciences. Following Connelly and Clandinin (1999), I propose that teachers' stories show their construction, maintenance, and negotiation of their identities as shaped and reshaped by the spatial-temporal and political dimension of experience. In attempting to employ Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) tripartite story type of *cover*, *sacred*, and *secret stories*, and a *conduit* as a preliminary framework in my initial research in order to

emphasize how the professional context shapes what teachers know, how they teach, and who they are politically, morally, and emotionally, I found this framework did not always fit my participants' interpretation of their stories. Emerging from data analysis was White's (1973) classification of narrative genres with a modification of its metaphysical underpinning by using Dilthey's concept of narrative unity (see Habermas, 1968/1971); that is, different from White, this study assumes each identity claim might implicate a metaphysical "I."

Dilthey's concept of narrative unity (see Habermas, 1968/1971) holds that one's life history is continuous and its unity resides in how one interprets life experience as meaningful or significant. "The unity of life history," Habermas wrote, "constitutes itself through the correction of retrospective interpretation that implicitly always encompasses the entire course of one's life including all earlier interpretations" (p. 153). In this case, one becomes not merely the author but a *self-critic* of one's life-stories.

White's (1973) classification of narrative genres was also employed to categorize my data. White explicated four types of metastory underlying history, including romance, satire, comedy, and tragedy. In particular, comedy and tragedy were characteristics of the employment of conflicts. White defined tragedy as the "intimations of states of division among men more terrible than that which incited the tragic agon at the beginning of the drama" (p. 9). The end of tragedy was

the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work with them. (p. 9)

Comedy referred to a plot in which different elements were revealed and then harmonized with one another; that is, the end of comedy was the reconciliation of people with others, society, or nature under the condition of society moving toward a better future due to this reconciliation of forces.

Borrowing White's (1973) concepts, I defined tragedy as the plotlines where my participants portrayed themselves as *captives* or *victims* who reluctantly resigned themselves to inevitably personal or social forces, and comedy as the plotlines where participants harmonized their struggles and conflicts by providing an ending with remote ideal images of teaching/learning in order to sustain their hope or faith. Although romance, comedy, and tragedy were intertwined in my data, this article focuses particularly on the genres of comedy and tragedy with an attempt to foreground their usefulness in explaining cross-cultural struggles.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on part of my initial research on how four East Asian AIs narratively shape their identities by adopting Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) narrative inquiry and Carspecken's (1996) critical qualitative research because both approaches provide a potent link between narrative and identity in education. That is, I collected teachers' narrative data but also emphasized the reconstructive analysis of the data. Due to the small pool of IAIs at the school site, a snowball sampling method was used. Four East Asian AIs in the School of Education (SoE) at a well-known research-oriented university were invited to participate (see Table 6.1). They were all non-native English speaking novice teacher educators with varying lengths of K-12 teaching experience in their own countries. They came from China, South Korea, and Japan, and taught Multicultural Education, Classroom Communication, Educational Computing, and Teaching Reading. They all perceived their students as predominantly local Caucasian Americans. Data were collected from two major sources: one-semester of classroom observations and three separate individual semi-structured interviews with each of the four participants. Data were reconstructed (Carspecken, 1996) to discover common themes and emerging patterns, leading to the reinterpretation of relevant literature. This recursive process thus generated the genred-style conceptual framework for coding. My data collection, analysis, and reports were validated using member checks and peer debriefing. Most of my participants viewed the conceptual framework as interesting. Only Jung interpreted tragedy as the commonsense understanding of a tragic story where the protagonist has a misfortune as a result of his own wrongdoing. But Jung also respected the researcher's interpretation.

As an East Asian female doctoral student myself, I had known most participants and developed friendships in various ways as time went by. Our rapport was a double-edged sword though. As I could identify the similarities and differences between their responses in class and their responses to me as a friend or as a researcher, they might have represented values similar to mine. I was hired as an AI myself after conducting the second interview, and my experience as an AI enabled me to better relate to my participants' stories.

TRAGIC COMEDY

Akiko

Akiko is a single, middle-class woman of Japanese and mixed Korean-Japanese heritage. In Japan she majored in English Literature with a specialization in American Culture and taught English and Japanese in a

Table 6.1. Demographics of my Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Content Area</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Previous Teaching</i>	<i>Years in U.S. (Before 2007)</i>	<i>Years as an AI (Before 2007)</i>	<i>Teaching Assignment</i>
Yi-Pei	Educational Technology	Chinese	Female	English in China	7	3	Educational Computing
Yá-Chi	Language Arts	Chinese	Female	English in China Chinese in America	4	4	Teaching Methodology: Reading
Jung	Curriculum	South Korean	Male	Elementary school teachers	6	2.5	Multicultural Education
Akiko	Educational Psychology	Japanese ¹	Female	English in Japan Japanese in America	8	2	Classroom Communication

1. Akiko's father is Japanese but her mother is Korean.

“prep school.”¹ She pursued her master’s degree in education and psychology in Boston right after college graduation. There she found her niche as an urban school psychologist, which led her to pursue a doctorate in educational psychology. Although she had earned a teaching license and had teaching experience in Japan, she viewed teaching as simply a back-up career plan.

Akiko worked a year and a half in a Japanese Saturday school and 2 years as an AI in order to meet her financial obligations. She confessed to having feelings of powerlessness as a member of a minority and a novice teacher “on the battlefield” during her AI teaching. She needed strength to jump through hoops as a foreigner that would not have existed in her own country and sometimes this led to her feeling exhausted. As she said, “I feel I really have to be tough and strong to be successful in this culture. Sometimes I feel it’s a little bit tiring.”

Akiko’s lack of teaching experience as a novice teacher clouded her understanding of student attitudes as well as their behaviors and needs, resulting in constant feelings of disappointment. She needed to struggle unrelentingly to retain control of her class. The effect of her status as a novice teacher was intertwined with (a) her self-identification as a counselor and (b) her Japanese upbringing: Akiko felt frustrated particularly about the students’ sense of entitlement, which was in sharp contrast with her experience in the Japanese educational system where diligence, teacher authority, and respect for teachers were emphasized. As she felt compelled to negotiate with her students, she felt trapped as she struggled to set boundaries with uncommitted students, finding a clash within her own identification as both a counselor (caring) and a teacher (fairness and equality). As she said,

I think that is a challenge for me. I don’t know where to draw the line.... I had one student.... He said he was depressed.... It was impossible for him to come to the group presentation day. I was furious.... There were so many ways that he could have done it differently.... He deserved not to have the points.... But if he is really depressed, I can’t just let it go, either.... I do more work as a counselor showing understanding of what individuals are going through. That’s my passion and that’s what I want to do. Sometimes by teaching, giving them grades, being fair to others, I can’t always be caring for individuals.

Indeed, the teaching struggles Akiko showed in her tragic stories represented disempowerment as a result of her exclusion from self-identified communities (a counselor versus a teacher and a Japanese teacher versus her predominantly Caucasian American students).

Akiko always ended her stories with a positive outlook despite her undergraduates’ apathy and uncommitted attitudes. This outlook she

achieved by taking a distanced, rational, and open-minded perspective. Her positive stance symbolizes a hope for better changes in the future. When narrating her shock and concern about students' narrow-mindedness, Akiko stated,

I had two minority students and the rest of them were white Caucasian students.... I think most of them were [the] same ... especially about sexual orientation issue. I have one concern. If they have one set of opinions about sexual orientation, say heterosexual-ness, then they have a student who is different from their sexual orientation and I am afraid of how they are going to treat that student as a teacher.... One of my colleagues said ... that she wants to meet them in four years when they graduate because they are freshmen so within four years there is a lot of space for them to change and grow.... I thought that was true and I want to give them the benefit of doubt that they will grow and they change.

While Akiko worried that students would reject other perspectives and ultimately replicate social inequality, she sustained the hope that her teacher education courses would gradually coax students towards critical self-reflection and plausible social or personal change. Regardless of her concerns and exhaustion, Akiko harmonized different forces in the end.

Ya-Chi

Ya-Chi is a traditional middle-class Chinese woman. She majored in English pedagogy and taught English as a foreign language (EFL) as a substitute teacher in a private English language school in China for 2 years prior to pursuing her master's degree in the Southern United States. There she found a niche in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). At that time, Ya-Chi had concurrently taught undergraduates how to teach English in content areas, an experience she described as "a tragedy," but nonetheless qualified her to teach "Teaching Methodology: Reading" at the university where she was working on her doctorate at the time of the study.

Ya-Chi was unlike Akiko in that she resigned herself to her status as a novice and a non-native speaker of English. The first time she taught "Teaching Methodology: Reading" in the United States, Ya-Chi was left alone without support. As she said, "So it was really a tragedy I feel. I feel so bad about myself at that time and my students also don't appreciate my effort." These kinds of comments reoccurred in our conversations. As a foreigner, Ya-Chi never felt fully competent of her cultural knowledge, knowledge of students and contexts, or her English proficiency. As she commented,

[Sigh].... If I were the curriculum designer of this course, I probably would not ask a non-native speaker with no experiences to teach this course.... Because experience is really important, especially the cultural. You do not share a lot in common with your students.

Whatever she considered as assets or potential resources in CFL (e.g., native-ness, experience, and professional training) had little effect, rendering her endlessly dissatisfied with herself as if her non-native-ness paralyzed her.

Like Akiko, Ya-Chi felt intolerant about students' uncommitted attitudes and entitlement to grades. The battle with her students climaxed in incidents when students expected to receive grades without effort, when students were constantly absent, and when students did not respond well to her teaching. The same problems worsened as the class size became smaller. Facing her students' apathy yet with inadequate ways to combat it, Ya-Chi felt unable to identify with or be accepted by her students, rendering her powerless as if captive to her own background.

Despite powerlessness and exhaustion, Ya-Chi always reconciled tensions with a bright ending in comedies; she could always identify something positive from the despairing experiences. As she commented on her experience in the South: "It really was a torture, but I did learn something. That is the good point ... I did learn. I can be aware of some of their needs, what a student really needs...." Ya-Chi drew strength to cope with teaching difficulties from her faith in a guiding utopian vision. As she said, "What I want to keep is I hope I still keep my idealistic state of mind. I still have good expectations of students." Indeed, while she narrated her tragic teaching, Ya-Chi also preserved a utopian image of a caring and autonomous community, which symbolizes a glimpse of hope.

Yi-Pei

Yi-Pei was a female Chinese doctoral student in educational technology. She had focused her study on English, literature and linguistics from junior high school and had become an assistant and EFL teacher at a university in China. However, she was not committed to teaching until she majored in educational technology in her current university. That commitment provided a solid foundation for her AI teaching.

Yi-Pei taught educational computing as an AI for 3 years during her stay in the United States. Her professors' learner-centered approaches to teaching had a tremendous impact on the way she structured her classes. She envisioned her teaching/learning community as comprised of committed, respectful and autonomous colearners. Yet the behavior of her

unmotivated students upset Yi-Pei and smashed this ideal. In the interviews and classes, she frequently used “distracting” and “begging” to illustrate how angry, upset, and frustrated she felt when her efforts were unacknowledged or, even worse, belittled. Yi-Pei recalled how she “begged” two of her “distracting” male students to learn:

Two students ... came ... with their PowerPoint just before class.... [They] ask me to decide if they cover[ed] every point in the assignment, so I look at ... the PowerPoint and realize they had something significant missing.... So, I told them.... They know that [in order] to do ... the work they will need to spend more time on it and they say, “This is really good.” ... but it lacked some of the technical requirements I ask for.... So, this is what I tell them.... “I understand you’re rushed now, but if you don’t do it, I can’t give you the points because it’s not fair to other students.” And so they were not very happy, but they still [did] it. And they don’t know how to do it. [Laughter] That’s the thing. I teach them. I beg them to listen to me in class and then I have to teach them again.... I feel that ... I spent EXTRA time ... but they still don’t appreciate it.

Yai-Chi’s use of the metaphor—“beggar”—showed her self-perception as a victim, contrasting with her ideal image of a learner-centered teacher. She also felt shocked while observing American students’ disrespect for their teachers because she would never be disrespectful to her teachers in China.

Her internal tension was most clear when Yi-Pei related her experience as an AI across her entire career. She attributed her failure to motivate students to her lack of leadership and social skills, as if she was a captive to her own sense of the caring and unsocial self. As she said, “As instructors really have control and you should really have leadership and I realize I’m not very good at leadership. I’m better at consulting with students.” Her self-identification as a consultant, rather than a leader, reoccurred in her teaching stories.

Despite her self-portrait as a captive to the uncontrollable personal factors (tragedy), Yi-Pei harmonized conflicts not simply by stepping down from the AI position but more fundamentally by projecting her hope to teach a utopian ideal of learning community in the future. Using the Chinese idioms, “Stand higher, see farther” and “You have to know more than you teach,” Yi-Pei sought to become wiser or more knowledgeable in order to become a good teacher and leader. This account harmonized her external and internal, moral and political grappling in her AI teaching by projecting a perfect teacher role which left its imprints in her past experiences as a Chinese teacher or learner. As Yi-Pei recalled her favorite Chinese linguistics teacher she admired and wished to emulate, she said,

it's kind of a scope of perspective. It's just like you know more about the stuff you teach. You talk about them as you talk about your own kids.... I remember the course I enjoyed taking the most. When I was in graduate school in Shanghai, I took a Linguistics class ... the professor, I think he had taught linguistics for so many years.... It's just like he's a family member.... He was telling linguistic theories and people in linguistics like a story ... just like a family history. So, he was enjoying it so much that we enjoyed it so much.... I feel I can be a better teacher, and I will enjoy teaching.

Using her memories to preserve herself in her current tragedy, Yi-Pei envisioned her class as joyful and pan-familial as her favorite linguistics teacher once had taught. This kind of ideal teacher combined the traits of respect (for the elderly and the knowledgeable), attentiveness, and seriousness that she had herself acquired from Chinese culture and the traits of student autonomy and freedom of expression which she had learned to value in the United States. The ideal image reflected her past joyful memory and functioned as a guide or hope for her future teaching.

Jung

Jung had been an elementary teacher for 11 years in six different schools in rural areas of South Korea before coming to the United States. He took one semester off in college to work in Seoul where he witnessed what Marx termed false consciousness; that is, the workers were contented with low wages and poor conditions. This experience puzzled him and provoked him to view education from a broader perspective. During the ensuing 11 years, Jung attended a government-sponsored master's program, where he taught briefly as a substitute university instructor.

Jung then commenced a doctoral degree in the United States in order to better understand how to develop good teacher education programs. From his third year in the United States, Jung worked as an AI by teaching field experience in the math and science departments for one semester and multicultural education to elementary preservice teachers for 2 years.

Jung was similar to Ya-Chi in that he did not feel qualified as an effective teacher educator, but paradoxically could not quit because he needed the financial support. He admitted bluntly, "I'm not an effective teacher educator." Yet different from Ya-Chi, Jung's ineffectiveness was related to his self-identified roles. He had been aware of his paradoxical, dual roles as a minority (without cultural power) and as an instructor (with normative power) from his students' subtle attitudes and behaviors, which deeply affected his reaction to the students. As Jung said, "I am always aware of myself as a minority and instructor in class." This dual role was

intertwined with the moral conflict between (a) his ideal community of teachers and students as equal, caring participants who should critically reflect on their lives and (b) his students' expectations that teachers should provide resources, answers, and knowledge. These clashes led him to feel "blocked" in establishing a good student-teacher relationship, which counteracted his ideal images of teaching. As he recalled,

One student actually wrote this- she said that I presented myself in the classroom as a minority.... She felt that she saw it as a negative because as an instructor I must be objective.... But I don't think I can be objective.... Instructors have their own opinions. Instructors have to participate in the classroom.... Learning and teaching must be cooperative.... But they saw me as a stranger in some ways. I am a stranger in their eyes because I am a minority.

Jung felt caught in between South Korean and American teaching cultures in this professional landscape. As a "stranger" to his students, Jung felt excluded, and that his voice was silenced and dishonored.

Despite his educational vision, Jung needed to negotiate with his students, thereby modifying his ideal standards through accommodations. Even though Jung lowered his ideal standards, he still held onto a remote, ideal image of learning community in order to enable him to keep teaching. He could not give up his faith in, or hope for, a better or larger change. As he said, "It's—[Sigh] it's hope. It's the hope that I have that someday they [students] may think about this topic and- they may try to find an alternative way of explanations." That is, Jung reconciled the paradoxical forces by putting his students' learning into perspective and by having a deep hope that his students would change in the future.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This article shows how four East Asian AIs rhetorically use (a) *tragedy* to depict their external struggles with their students and internal struggles with themselves due to uncontrollable personal (e.g., personality) or social factors (e.g., non-nativeness, noviceness, and cultural preference) and (b) *comedy* to harmonize their grapplings by projecting a deep faith in and hope for a utopian image of learning communities in the future. As tragedy brings into one's teaching difficulties, struggles, and failure in the past in order to release one's feeling of emotional pressure, preserve one's dignity, and arouse the empathy of others; comedy projects a to-be realized utopian world in order to re-motivate oneself to continue teaching. These tragic comedies reflect the bitter-sweetness of the teaching rhythms, the hybrid nature of cultural identities, and the reconstitution of

who one is while shifting in-between cultures (e.g., Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Guo, 2006; He, 2002a, b, c; Li, 2005; Wang, 2004, 2006). As “cultures do provide specific types of plots for adoption by their members in their configuration of self” (Phelan, 2000, p. 290), it is thus reasonable to infer that East Asian teachers might adopt a plotline of tragic comedy, and if so, how international teachers’ cultural backgrounds impact their accounts and resolutions of cross-cultural struggles deserves further research at all levels of education.

Differences beyond East Asian cultures also deserve further research. Elbaz-Luwisch (2004), for example, found similar storylines of “battles” and “suffering” in Israel. In particular, future research can examine the *functional* relations between cultures and genred stories, as well as the *consequences* of telling tragic comedy among different cultural groups. For instance, Jung’s story showed that his self-portrait as a victim was criticized by his students, consistent with Alberts’ (2008) research that the American students preferred teachers to be assertive. Does this mean the Caucasian Americans might prefer a genre of romance characterized by a hero(ine) triumphing over difficulties? Do other minority teachers in the U.S. have the similar preference? Cross-sections of culture, identity and genres suggest the promise of research on the functions and consequences of genred stories in classrooms. By so doing, I believe teachers can increase cross-cultural sensitivity among both international teachers and their students.

The genred framework of tragic comedy may not only capture the spatial-temporal, emotional and moral dimensions of cross-cultural teaching, but more fundamentally reflect the importance of the target community’s *recognition* of the values East Asians place on harmony, unity, diligence and familial relationships (see Huang, 2008). Although international teachers’ *silence* may be related to the values which they placed on harmony and nonconfrontation, examinations can transform their silence into a *teachable* moment when they assertively discuss with their students the importance and impacts of cross-cultural values and plots. Nevertheless, this teachable moment cannot become a *learnable* moment unless students are also open-minded and critically reflective (Dewey, 1916). Preservice teacher education programs should thus broaden students’ horizons to value the international perspectives of teachers through moral sensitivity, reflection and imagination (see Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). Like the participants’ teaching, research looks to future.

NOTE

1. The school was a cram school designed to increase the test scores of K-12 students.

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