



Innovating a constructivist learning model to instill cultural diversity respect into youths in a Thai tourism community



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ABSTRACT

Local cultures are social tools to facilitate harmonious existence of man and environment. But today globalization process intensely reduced cultural diversity and would impact on harmonious man-environment co-existence. This study was based on an instrument case of the Kudijeem multicultural tourism community where local residents possessed diverse ethnicities, religions and ways of life and offered their sundry cultures as tourist attractions. This community possessed high risks of cultural losses and clashes due to internal diversity as well as arrivals of external cultures brought by visiting tourists and its context was favorable for devising a learning tool to reduce the risks. The study was aimed at assessing the cultural diversity respect of youths in the community and innovating and evaluating a learning process to elevate their respect. The study used the qualitative approach in collecting data relating to the historical, demographical and cultural background of the studied community and using the action research process, particularly the after-action reflection, to innovate a model for learning of cultural diversity respect through a joint effort of 15 voluntary youths and 22 community experts.

The results of the study revealed that, prior to their participation in the study, the youths had low level of cultural diversity respect. In nine months of their learning action, the youths cultivated their respect to the level that they pre-determined. From their learning action, a constructivist learning model was innovated. In the L-CULTURA or the Learn-to-Cultivate Cultures Model, the youths engaged in nine spiraling steps of taking up challenges, checking stocks, planning self-study, searching for new information, sorting the information, conveying the information, getting feedbacks, reflecting on learning experience and creating habits. Community experts and the researchers played roles in scaffolding their learning process as motivators, stimulators, challengers, advisors, resource persons and facilitators.

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Introduction

Natural environment had a significant role in determining the cultural pattern of each locality. Differences in the natural environment led to differences or diversity of

cultural patterns, enabling local residents to live in harmony with their natural environment (Steward, 1955; Taylor, 1871). The recent globalized economic development, however, has veiled considerable impacts on local cultures. The new global consumerism culture is not only depleting natural resources, creating competition and conflicts but also luring local residents away from their natural environment and cultures. Tourism communities are good examples of localities with high intensity of

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cultural interactions. Amid cultural clashes, suppression, assimilation, domination and resistance, homogenization, heterogenization and hybridization (Netphokaew, 2004), local residents, especially youths, have a high tendency to become oblivious of the relationship between their natural environment and cultures, unable to evaluate their situation and fail to make an appropriate decision as to how to lead a sustainable and peaceful way of life. The communities have high risks of losing their own cultures as much as embracing foreign cultures that are not appropriate for their environment.

The formal education that the youths in high risk communities enroll could hardly fill up the widening gap because the education itself is designed without considering contextual diversity of localities and often treats the youths as passive learners (Worawan Na Ayudhaya, 1996). There is a need to fill in the gap by engaging the youths in an active learning process so that they develop skills to acquire knowledge about their cultures and apply their cultural learning skills to develop cultural diversity respect. Based on the learning philosophy of social constructivism that places importance on experiential and cooperative learning, this study was aimed at innovating a constructivist learning model to cultivate cultural diversity respect among youths in a tourism community. Its three purposes include: (1) evaluating the present level of cultural diversity respect of the youths, (2) innovating a constructivist learning model for cultural diversity respect through their action learning, and (3) evaluating their achievement in learning the cultural diversity respect.

Theoretical Framework

This study premised itself on three theoretical bases in order to pave way for the innovation of cultural diversity respect learning model. The first basis was the cultural studies discipline that stressed the importance of cultural diversity in maintaining natural environment diversity for sustainable living (Satienthai & Jarusombat, 2011) and cultural diversity respect for peaceful living (Phongsaphit, 1997). The discipline helped to define the cultural diversity respect learning goals as comprising an appreciation of own cultures, a sense of self and community culture protection, and respect for other cultures.

The second premise was the environmental education discipline that prescribed six learning objectives of knowledge, skill, participation, awareness, attitude, and ability on evaluation (CDE, 1997). Integrating these objectives with the innovation goals, the indicators of cultural diversity respect learning were defined as including the knowledge on the meanings of local and other cultures, skills and participation in the search for the meanings, presentation of local cultures, recognition of the importance of local and other cultures, acceptance of responsibilities as a community member, positive attitude towards the value of local and other cultures and ability to evaluate the situation and decide an appropriate action.

To find the means attain the innovation goals and learning indicators, the study premised itself on the philosophy of constructivism. The philosophy believed that active experience instilled deep learning, attitude and

ability to apply the new knowledge and learning strategies in other contexts (Cook & Cook, 2005; Richardson, 1994). In addition, the philosophy explained that physical and social environment, maturity, social interactions, language, perception, belief, needs, interest, background, and expectation could influence the construction of new knowledge (Anthony, 1996; Gredler, 1997), expand the learners' "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1987), and shore them up to Piaget's equilibration through knowledge assimilation and accommodation (Sutherland, 1992). Appropriate supports from other people (Duffy & Cunningham, 1984; Osborn & Freyberg, 1985) were helpful but the learners themselves were responsible for their own learning.

These three disciplines were integrated to provide the means and ends in the innovation of a cultural diversity respect learning model in this study.

Research Methodology

The study was based on the instrument case of the Kudijeen community in Wat Kalaya Subdistrict, Thonburi District of Bangkok. Kudijeen was established in the Ayutthaya era as a trading post run by Chinese merchants and became a multicultural community when Thai and foreigners fled the succumbing Ayutthaya to settle here. Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, Catholicism and Islam turned it into a multicultural community. The recent community-based tourism exposed the community to even more cultures brought by tourists. Unless the local residents especially youths were equipped with cultural learning skills and developed cultural diversity respect, cultural clashes would be imminent. This community was thus in need of the cultural diversity learning and at the same time provided a good ambience for innovating a cultural diversity respect learning model.

Fifteen youths who participated in the study were recruited based on three major criteria, i.e. their volunteerisms and guardians' permissions, their ages and their cultural backgrounds. In order to allow for the willingness of the research participants, the research process engaged them only during weekends when they did not go to school. They were in the age range of 12–17 which was considered an appropriate range for cultivating cultures (Foster, 1969) and the range that possessed high risks of infatuation in fashionable media and culture (Sinlarat, 2013) that drew them away from cultural learning, posing a threat of larger cultural divide for the future generation. These seven boys and eight girls were from diverse cultural backgrounds; four were Mahayana Buddhists, three were Hinayana Buddhists, four were Catholics and four were Muslims. Twenty-two people identified by local residents as knowledgeable in local cultures also participated in the research process in various capacities.

The research conducted from March 2013 to February 2014 followed the qualitative and action research approaches. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews of community experts and youths regarding the general community conditions and the pre-project levels of the youths' cultural diversity respect. The action research approach engaged the youths in

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