

In these uncertain times: Educators build cultural awareness through planned international experiences

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry explored the effectiveness of planned international experiences in promoting cultural awareness, understanding and appreciation among American educators. Participating educators ($n = 12$) were immersed in foreign cultures for 2–3 weeks during three different summers. To document the effectiveness of cultural immersion, participants completed pre- and post-visit surveys. Pre-visit data showed lack of cultural awareness. After the visit, however, participants had gained broader awareness, understanding and appreciation of host cultures such that familiar cultural practices were rarely used as the only point of reference. Follow-up interviews showed possible sustained acculturation. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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1. Introduction

In the current reality of rapid globalization that has increased immigration of people from poor to wealthy nations (Sokolower, 2006), and as modern technologies transform the world into a global village (Jones, 1999), cultural misunderstanding and suspicion might increase (Traor'e, 2006). Indeed, when people of different cultural persuasions are in shared spaces, cultural tensions emerge. In America, for example, immigrant communities are angry, frustrated, confused, saddened and disillusioned at the

high levels of intolerance between different cultures and the dominant society (Bennett, 1993; Traor'e, 2006). Notwithstanding, however, the effects of globalization and modern technologies will continue to blur the natural and social barriers that previously separated different nations and cultures. Consequently, human mobility from nation to nation in search of various opportunities might continue, thus creating a need to explore factors that could heighten human tensions in a global village. One such factor is ethnocentrism. Although tourist-based cultural programs are not effective at challenging ethnocentrism (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Smith, 1998; Williams, 2005), data from this study that involved planned cultural immersion show that participants developed cultural understanding, an important ingredient in the process of eradicating ethnocentrism.

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As the world becomes a global village, ethnocentrism or judging other cultures using one's own culture as the norm or standard is fueling cultural misunderstanding. Ethnocentrism has amplified human tensions resulting in anger, frustration, confusion, suddenness and disillusionment for some people (Traor'e, 2006). Addressing this issue, Gacel-Avila (2005) challenged educational institutions to implement curricula aimed at socializing citizens to live in a global context effectively and successfully. A curriculum that prepares citizens to "respect humanity's differences and cultural wealth" is preferable. This culturally affirming curriculum could be implemented through cultural immersion. In this study, the researchers discuss the benefits of immersing American pre-service and in-service educators in planned international cultural experiences.

Cultural immersion has different meanings and interpretations. While some programs recommend home-stays, others view cultural immersion as being physically present, without time limit, in a country or host culture to study (Rodriguez, 2000). In this research study, cultural immersion means being physically present in a foreign culture for 2–3 weeks to interact actively with host cultures through talking, observing, listening, studying artifacts, reflecting, questioning and participating in meals, music, dances, religious activities and educational programs. The ability to learn from local communities and to tolerate ambiguity in order to develop cultural awareness and understanding was valued.

1.1. Experiential learning versus tourist travel

Planned experiential cultural learning differs from tourist experiences in multiple ways. Unlike planned experiences that require an enormous amount of effort at both the planning and implementations stages, tourist travel lacks depth in terms of curriculum planning and focus (Derman-Sparks, 1998). The desire to "Wow" or excite and entertain participants drives a tourist-based experience. Most destructive though is the tendency for a tourist curriculum to provide a platform for comparison (them versus us). While comparing familiar with unfamiliar cultural practices, participants are more likely to engage ethnocentric principles, i.e. the use of participants' familiar cultures as the standard or norm. Because a tourist-based curriculum is fragmented and haphazard, it offers limited space for learning based on interaction with views, concepts,

issues, themes and problems from multicultural perspectives. A tourist-based curriculum has the potential to be ethnocentric and to emphasize exotic differences between cultures (Williams, 2005). Consequently, Smith (1998) considered it an ineffective teaching approach about other cultures. Rather, carefully planned curricula that immerse participants in disorienting cultural situations are recommended because they culturally transform participants.

Planned cultural activities allow participants to interact with concepts and themes from diverse multicultural perspectives, a necessary step in the process of building cultural awareness (Williams, 2005). In addition, programs planned to immerse participants in "other" cultures for weeks or months have the advantage of "learning-by-doing, virtually twenty-four hours a day" (Hopkins, 1999, p. 36). When participants are immersed in unfamiliar cultural situations, especially those that do not align with their cultural norms for a prolonged period of time, they are likely to cross cultural bridges/borders, i.e. invisible entities that are essential in the allocation of societal power and privilege (Anzaldúa, 2001). When planned carefully, cultural programs help participants to cross naturally and freely "cultural bridges" by developing intercultural communication skills, cultural empathy, flexibility and non-judgmental perspectives (Gacel-Avila, 2005). Given the many benefits of cultural immersion, the researchers designed these international experiences to increase participants' awareness, understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

Building cultural appreciation is an intentional act that is preceded by the development of self-awareness (Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002). Becoming self-aware requires an understanding of one's own culture before studying other cultures. According to Robins et al., becoming aware of other cultures involves an appreciation of one's position in relation to issues of (a) tolerance or the ability to understand and to appreciate unfamiliar cultures, (b) valuing diversity, which means accepting that different cultures act differently, (c) cultural judgment or a refusal to use familiar cultural norms to draw conclusions about unfamiliar ones and (d) knowledge of barriers or forces that limit the exploration and appreciation of other cultures. Denial, a refusal to consider culture as a conduit to power and privilege irrespective of supporting evidence, is one such force. Others

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