



Transforming educational practices: Cultural learning for short-term sojourners



Stephanie Wing Yan Lo-Philip^{a,*}, Charles Carroll^b, Teen Li Tan^b, Ooi Yong Ann^b, Yong Heng Tan^b, Siew Hwee Seow^b

^a National University of Singapore, Department of English Language & Literature, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Blk AS5, 7 Arts Link, 117570, Singapore

^b National University of Singapore, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Block AS1, #04-28, Arts Link, 117570, Singapore

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 May 2014

Received in revised form 12 October 2015

Accepted 14 October 2015

Keywords:

Experiential learning

Visual anthropology

Study abroad

Reflexivity

Critical thinking

Intercultural competence

ABSTRACT

The incorporation of anthropological methods in tertiary educational programs for study abroad students' cultural learning has shown promising results for cultivating an in-depth appreciation and knowledge of the local culture, intercultural competence, critical thinking, and reflexivity. However, there are fewer studies that investigate short-term programs and consider how visual anthropological methods can contribute to the learning of culture. This study explores the learning trajectories and personal growth of a group of Singaporean university undergraduates during an intensive six-week summer field school. Results show that visual anthropological methods can be successfully applied for the learning of culture, development of reflexivity, critical thinking and intercultural competence even within a short span of time. The paper concludes with implications and suggestions for pedagogy and program implementation.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, many tertiary institutions have made the development of intercultural competence, reflexivity and critical thinking a major goal (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). One of the ways to achieve these aims is to offer more international exposure to students (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). Among the many programs that are now available, faculty-led short term sojourns or field schools have gained increasing popularity. This means that the role of faculty and institutions has and will continue to become crucial in study abroad (Goode, 2008; Paige & Goode, 2009). While the overseas context can provide rich opportunities for intercultural exchange, simply being present in the host country does not guarantee the facilitation of cultural learning, intercultural sensitivity or critical thinking (Jackson, 2006; Roberts, 1993; Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). This begs the question of how university educators can design programs that push students to optimize their time abroad.

In this paper, we build on previous research that argues for the incorporation of anthropological methods as an effective and meaningful tool in the learning of culture (Gmelch & Gmelch, 1999; Heath, 1983; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Jackson, 2006, 2011; Roberts, 1993; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2011). We claim that these methods can be effectively

* Corresponding author at: Flat D, 51st Floor of Block 7 (La Rossa A), Coastal Skyline, No. 12 Tung Chung Waterfront Road, Tung Chung, Lantau Island, Hong Kong.

E-mail addresses: stephanie.io@gmail.com, soccmc@nus.edu.sg (S.W. Yan Lo-Philip).

applied in short-term summer programs with an overseas component. Our study expands current inquiry in two significant ways. First, while there have been some studies on language learners (Jackson, 2006, 2008, 2011; Roberts et al., 2001), there has been a dearth of work on non-language learners in short-term programs. By short-term, we mean that the length of overseas stay is between one to six weeks long. Second, there are few, if any, studies that have examined the role of visual anthropological methods in study abroad programs.

1.1. Cultural learning

In this study, we take culture to be a symbolic system that guides the production and interpretation of meaning of acts, roles, identities, relationships, objects and other semiotic systems (Kress, 2009). Culture is partially handed down from previous generations, and partially collaboratively produced and understood through in situ social practice (Bourdieu, 1973; Geertz, 1983; Ortner, 2006). We recognize agency in the “contested, temporal, and emergent” representations and explanations of cultures (Clifford, 1986, p. 19).

Cultural learning can encompass many facets and we acknowledge that the areas we list here are not exhaustive. In our study, we focused on whether and how reflexivity, critical thinking and intercultural competence would develop during cultural learning. We conceptualized reflexivity as “a process that challenges the [individual] to explicitly examine how her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter their research” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212). It requires the individual to see herself as “an active participant in knowledge production rather than as a neutral bystander”. Critical thinking is the ability to (1) understand information, (2) evaluate information, (3) articulate reasons for the evaluation and (4) offer a creative statement (Shepelak et al., 1992).

For our study, we drew from several scholars to conceptualize intercultural competence. First, we incorporated several of Ruben and Kealey's (1979) key observable behaviors in cross-cultural communication: (1) respect (the ability to express respect in culturally appropriate ways and a general respect for others' worldviews), (2) interaction posture (the ability to respond to others in a nonjudgmental way), (3) orientation to knowledge (the degree to which a person views knowledge as constructed and subjective), (4) empathy (the capacity to “put oneself in another's shoes”), and (5) tolerance for ambiguity (the ability to react to ambiguous situations). We included the ability to know how to interact appropriately and effectively where appropriateness is defined as “avoiding the violation of valued rules or expectancies” and effectiveness as “the achievement of valued objectives or rewards” (Spitzberg, 1989, p. 250). Finally, we considered personal traits such as curiosity, discovery, and open-mindedness (Deardorff, 2006). Intercultural competence, then, can generally be understood as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (as cited in Deardorff, 2006, p. 248).

Our aim was to describe and understand the process by which students developed such skills (or not) and the role that (visual) anthropological methods played in cultivating these skills. As such, we strived to situate and understand students' attitudes and behaviors in their expression of their understanding of local cultural practices and beliefs.

1.2. (Visual) Anthropology

Anthropology focuses upon developing complex understandings of human societies and cultures. Contemporary anthropological methods aligned with the scope of our study included participant observation, interviewing, informal conversations and the collection of any data that is relevant to the research agenda (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Effective fieldwork demands a high level of curiosity, a commitment to pursue for local cultural knowledge and the ability to maintain lengthy conversations and interactions with target group members (Gmelch & Gmelch, 1999). For ethnographers, the major goal is to gain what Geertz described as “the native's point of view”—how participants interpret their acts and experiences (Geertz, 1983; Willis & Trondman, 2000).

Visual anthropology is a subfield within the discipline of anthropology with contested historical roots (Durington & Ruby, 2011; Heider, 2006; Loizos, 1993; Rouch, 2003). It is largely concerned with “the use of visual material in anthropological research and ... the study of visual systems and visible culture” (Morphy & Banks, 1997, p. 1). Banks (as cited in Pink, 2007, p. 40) divides such methods into three types: ‘making visual representations (studying society by producing images)’; ‘examining pre-existing visual representations’ (studying images for information about society) and ‘collaborating with social actors in the production of visual representations’. In part, it thus involves the collection, analysis and production of audio-visual material (Collier, 1967; Rouch, 2003). It also necessitates an understanding of aesthetics as anthropological films must offer strong story lines and present data in a visually attractive way (Tobin & Hseuh, 2007).

However, visual anthropology must be understood as far more complex than simply the gathering of visual research data and the visual presentation of research findings (see Barbash & Taylor, 1997; MacDougall, 1998). Our standpoint is that technical training (see Mead, 1995; Barbash & Taylor, 1997), immersed in critical, reflexive thinking about the practice (Rony, 1996) is an essential component of contemporary visual anthropology. While visual anthropologists must know how to select, operate and work with appropriate equipment, their primary focus must be on what Rony calls “the extraordinarily multivalent problems of representation” (1996, p. 218), the inherent biases perpetuated by the use of the camera, and the production of discourses and relations of power through anthropological research (Ortner, 2006).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7323875>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7323875>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)