

Beyond the Looking Glass: An Experiential Analysis Of a Multicultural Learning Adventure

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The issue of globalization is seen daily in local and national media. What were once only national corporations have become multinational or transnational organizations. It is difficult now to imagine a time when there was an environment in which only one language was spoken. Naturally, globalization spread beyond the confines of business, governmental, and scientific environments and into the academic environment, for how else could students be prepared to function globally in terms of the demanding and complex requirements of commerce, politics and cooperative research?

Contextual Introduction

“...there is no contradiction between the perpetuation of one’s native culture and attaining excellence in the new culture”
(Feuerstein, www.icelp.org).

University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) is a small, Catholic, Hispanic-serving, liberal arts transitioning to doctoral university nestled scenically in the heart of San Antonio, Texas. UIW was founded by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word in 1881; it began as a school serving the K-12 population and soon expanded its offerings to the college level, to include bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Ultimately, in its emergence into a university, it received approval from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) to offer a doctoral degree in Education with emphases in International Education and Entrepreneurship, Organizational Leadership, and Mathematics Education. One currently challenging aspect of the doctoral studies is the international nature of its students including Hispanics, Chinese, Koreans,

and three cohorts of students from Taiwan, averaging 15 students each. These students have a diverse range of English literacy, from limited English-speaking skills to near fluency and, in the case of the Taiwan cohorts had, in their first experiences, been separated from all other graduate students in the classroom environment.

This presented a challenge for the authors who taught the doctoral Interdisciplinary Studies course. This course was an attempt to integrate the Taiwan, Korean, Hispanic, and American students. As suggested by Hofstede and cited in Nahavandi (1999), some of the major expected cultural differences we saw included: group learning versus individual learning, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and time orientation. We also discovered that there was a difference in Eastern/Western teaching styles; the Taiwan students exclaimed to the authors, for example, "...you teach with your whole body!" In light of these disparities, our teaching strategy became to create a multicultural, multilingual environment in which all doctoral students could address the issues of social science philosophy, economic theory, and personal responsibility. This translated into defining and developing thinking and meaning-making for students from many different cultures, from diverse areas of professional expertise, and with very different personal philosophies. We felt that success in combining these groups of students would dictate how future international cohorts could effectively integrate and interact in an academic environment; thus, our adaptation of curriculum and teaching methods became very important for the future of our doctoral teaching methodologies.

We set up a *constructivist* environment by focusing on the "...creative process of inquiry that is contextually functional and culturally adaptive" (Kimmel, 1997, p. 16). The *question*, therefore, was "*What strategies could we use to establish a collaborative, constructivist learning environment that made the best use of the native English speakers as mediators?* Creating a

constructivist learning environment was our first task. Understanding and working with the constructivist model had been a long-term focus for both of the professors; both of us had set up classrooms based on Catherine Twomey Fosnot's model. Fosnot suggests that the *new* theories of constructivist learning are more accurately an integration of a number of theorists with which educators are familiar: "Constructivism, as a psychological construct, stems from the burgeoning field of cognitive science, particularly the later work of Jean Piaget, the sociohistorical work of Lev Vygotsky, and the work of Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, and Nelson Goodman, among others who have studied the role of representation in learning" (Fosnot, 1996, pp. 10-11). This model, highly touted for use in K-12 classrooms, has been slow in acceptance by professors in higher education. Here, we more often find the *transmission of knowledge* model, whereas the constructivists ally with the *transformational learning* model.

One of the critical issues for the authors was creating a framework in which we understood the language, social, cultural, and philosophical needs of all students. According to Kimmel (1997, p. 18), Vygotsky "...was critically aware of the importance of the social element in language construction and learning. He cited the need to establish in the classroom an environment of social cooperation and interaction of the learners, replacing the traditional communicative lines between teacher and learner." Just as language construction applies to children who are learning to speak and expand their vocabulary, so too does it apply to Asian students who have to learn how to converse *academically* in English in a very short period of time. One way the authors fostered language construction for these students was to set up mentoring relationships with the American students. This framework, combined with the following course objectives, helped us to build an instructional strategy to meet the needs of all the learners:

1. connecting experiential learning to new concepts of social and philosophical constructions;
2. transferring learning from one cultural model to another;
3. envisioning global solutions to global problems;
4. extending critical learning skills to new formats; and
5. challenging new second-language speakers to take risks with other learners.

In some respects, the authors were faced with a situation described by Jean Lave's concept of situational learning in which she remarks that "...since learning is a mode of action and action is situationally grounded in the context of the individual, then learning is closely tied to the conditions in which the learner is situated in solving some practical problem" (1991, as cited in Kimmel, 1997, p. 22). In this instance, Asian students were out of their natural element or environment, and the authors were expecting them to apply the theories and concepts they were learning—in a second language! —to their native environment. Not only were we questioning if learning was transferable from a professorial perspective, but the Asian students were also questioning if and how they would apply the Western concepts of organizational leadership and philosophy in their Eastern culture. This questioning became, as the course developed, one of the major talking points of the class; we achieved a global perspective by the practical aspect of application of theory to specific cultural differences in meaning.

In terms of *scaffolding*, or building the structure or foundation from which the student could find comfort in learning, we created visual, kinesthetic (tactile), and auditory activities that helped the students depict the Eastern understanding of Western philosophy. For instance, we used a number of different puzzles for a practical exercise in discriminating and solving problems. We had mixed the pieces, leaving some out of one group's and adding extra pieces to another group's pile of pieces. We asked the students to assemble the puzzles within their groups. We then advised there was only one rule—no language other than English could be spoken. While they quickly discovered we did not create a rule to prevent them from

collaborating with other groups or using nonverbal forms of communication in order to trade for their missing puzzle pieces, they were distressed when we talked about the exercise at its conclusion. What we did not realize was that by not giving the correct information to the Asian students, we had also violated a cultural norm. They felt we were essentially “lying” to them, an affront to the Asian concept of the teaching paradigm: the teacher always gives correct and true information in the transfer of knowledge!

In this time of global learning and teaching, educators of adults are compelled to rethink their modes of “information transfer” and learning. We knew we were also making use of what Feuerstein calls *the mediated learning experience*.

Instructional Strategy

The textbooks¹ used in this course were difficult; they required an academic, English vocabulary, and were grounded in the Western philosophical concepts of meaning-making (Goodman, 1978), time, space, logic, and community. These textbooks were difficult even for the American students to read and understand. The professors had to get out of their *instructional box* and explore ways in which the English as a second language (ESL) students could make sense of the material. The socializing of the students into an integrated class was important; the Asian students needed to speak with, relate to, and work with the other doctoral students, and vice versa. Not only would the social context of the classroom help students learn better, but the ESL speakers could extend their knowledge of English as they spoke with, and related to, the American students. The authors relied on Lev Vygotsky’s work on language for direction in these efforts.

¹ Fay, Brian (1996), *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell
Nussbaum, Martha (2000), *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
Sen, Amartya (1999), *Development as Freedom*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf

As a result, the following strategies were developed and used throughout the semester.

1. Activities and guided discussions were used to enable the ESL students to convey, experientially, their understanding of the concepts.
2. The students were required to present ‘weekly news’ reports relating issues relevant to their country of origin and applying the course concepts—this created the tie between cognitive learning and culturally based experience.
3. The American students were assigned as mentors to the ESL students in an effort to encourage relationship building between the cultures. This was also an attempt to enable learning about the different cultures through interaction. The mentors actually served as *mediators of learning* in that they facilitated the relationship between professor and student and also increased the speed, translation and assimilation of the course readings. They made extensive use of a knowledge management site—www.egroups.com—to reinforce the classroom discussions and external readings.
4. Classroom assignments were modified to accommodate the *group* culture values of the Asian students wherein writing and presenting papers and projects is done by two or more students. In this case, it seemed easier/more acceptable to have the American students adapt to the Eastern style of learning than vice versa. It also introduced American students to a different approach to learning.
5. The authors (professors) adopted roles and carried those roles throughout the semester for consistency in practice and to reinforce stability in the learning environment. For example, Jessica Kimmel did much of the lecturing and Annette Craven did much of the guided discussion and learning activities.

Feuerstein's Mediated Learning Experience Concept

Reading the conference proposal on the Web, the authors recognized how much our experience reflected the outcomes of the conference; we read more about Feuerstein and saw how his work actually gave us a theoretical basis by which we could explain our innovative teaching experience.

When we read about Professor Reuven Feuerstein's work with immigrant adults and children to Israel (Feuerstein, 2001), many from very diverse backgrounds, languages, and cultural experiences, the urge to see how problems were solved directed us to his body of work. Subsequently, we put together Feuerstein's ideas with our other theories and analyzed our own actions within the theory bases. What we, as professors, were confronted with was the diversity issues of vastly differing populations, not unlike that cited by Feuerstein:

...one of the major difficulties confronting new immigrants and their children. This difficulty stems from the static approach to evaluation that starts and finishes with the manifest level of immigrants' functioning in linguistic, cognitive, conceptual, and operational spheres. This level of functioning is perceived as reflecting their true capacities which are fixed and unchangeable...

The culturally different individuals find themselves in a disadvantaged position while negotiating with a dominant culture to which they have to adapt...

The condition of the immigrant Ethiopian population is characterized by the fact that in terms of cultural difference, their culture is very distant from the modern Israeli culture to which they had to adapt. This cultural difference is reciprocal, in the sense that representatives of the dominant Israeli culture do not usually have adequate knowledge to understand the immigrants' way of thinking, their concepts, vocabulary, and levels of understanding what are so different and so strange to those who must integrate them into the educational system.

(from Preface by Prof. Reuven Feuerstein, <http://www.icelp.org>, 4/02/01)

We thus found ourselves professors for a combined class of 27 students whose worldviews collided, whose language skills were different (both in kind and in level), and whose conceptual base carried vastly different intellectual models from which to draw. When we set up the email groups with American students as mentors, we were actually setting up *mediated*

learning experiences with experienced cultural mediators. Feuerstein's work finally gave us the language to describe this adequately. The American students not only were to help the Taiwanese, Korean, Chinese, and Mexican students, but these mentors functioned to show them how the processes worked. In essence, we wanted the American students to enculturate the students from foreign countries into the American concept of university learning.

The logic we used in structuring this class of students from multiple nations and linguistic backgrounds is what Myron Tribus defines in his article "Bridging in both directions" (2001):

The process whereby one human helps another to draw the deeper lessons from experience is called Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). MLE describes how one person helps another person to interpret their life experiences and to draw from them rules and principles useful in another time and place. MLE also includes helping the learner "bridge" to other applications and to recognize the meaning of the rules and principles. The advantage of formalizing this process, MLE, is that now MLE can itself be analyzed, improved and most importantly, taught to others...

There is a difference between teaching and mediating:

Teaching is concerned with having students master a subject. The students demonstrate their mastery by what they say about the subject, how they solve problems posed in the subject and by showing skill in using the tools and methods associated with the subject. Teaching presumes the intelligence is already developed and that mastery of the subject is the main goal.

Mediation is concerned with having students master their own thinking processes.

The students demonstrate this mastery by showing an awareness of how they organize their thought processes, how they use their intellectual resources to acquire, organize and analyze information, how they develop strategies for controlling themselves as they encounter challenges. Mediation looks upon the development of intelligence as the main goal and as intelligence is developed, teaching goals will be met.

(from "Bridging in both directions" <http://www.icelp.org>)

We see our own experience as one also of "bridging in both directions"—a way of thinking, processing, and learning that creates learning for all parties in the mentoring/mediating experience, and one that relies upon the intellectual notion of continuous growth and development of intellectual functioning.

Lessons Learned

One of our most important findings was the effectiveness of using the cultures present to establish the classroom culture. For example, the formalities of the traditional Asian classroom are important to the students; these were identified and assimilated on a weekly basis. One Asian student brought tea (special cups for each professor!) to each class. Professors and students alike learned to appreciate this courtesy and comment on it. In return, when one of the professors had a birthday, cakes were brought in and *Happy Birthday* was sung in Mandarin and English! In return, the authors brought fruit and cookies, and the American students often brought surprise treats for the whole class. Thus, the Asian cultural gift of generosity and hospitality was practiced by one and all.

We also quickly learned that a great deal of affirmation and reinforcement was necessary for the Asian students (this same conclusion was reached regarding graduate students from Mexico). We struggled for several weeks to persuade the Asian students to speak out in class, challenge the readings, challenge their American colleagues, and even challenge the professors – all to no avail. Finally, the Asian group leader informed us (in a formal appointment) that the Asian learning paradigm is that what is published as text, or conveyed by the professor, must be correct. Questioning the text or the professors is not an acceptable practice in the Asian culture; information in print or from the professor's mouth carried the weight of authority that was not normally challenged.

It took a great deal of time and effort to convince the Asian students that their experience and prior education qualified them to express their impressions of the readings and discussions. The culminating experience was a class discussion about student participation expectations and an arrangement was negotiated whereby the Asian students could ask their American *mentors*

on-line questions about the readings. This enabled them to strengthen their English skills while also *saving face*. Another way we created a constructivist experience in this framework was the establishment of the *weekly news* reports. Students would pair up, find a current news story, and make a presentation to the class. Slowly, the students all began to critique the news with differing worldviews and reports with which they were familiar.

The e-mail groups and the socializing in the class enhanced the connection between the Asian and American students. The Asian students had already formed consistent study groups, a model by which they study and learn, and in which they confront the texts, lectures, and one another to discover the essence of the assignments. Although the Asian group learning culture was adopted, we made the decision to mix all students, Asian, Hispanic, and American, in a variety of groups. This contributed to the collaborative nature of the class.

Conclusion

One of the most astonishing outcomes of mixing the cultures was the transference of attitude from one culture to another. The Asian students are extremely respectful of their teachers; homework was timely and beautifully packaged, and assigned readings were taken very seriously. Grades were never questioned or debated. There was rarely a situation that required the negotiation for a later due date. This respect, which was present with some of the American students, was reinforced for the American students and became a matter of philosophical discussion on several occasions.

Another attitudinal transference was the concept of humor and/or teasing. Once the Asian students discovered it acceptable to use humor (even the professors teased one another), they experimented and became quite adept at this social “easing” of the formality of schooling. One student, a practicing Jew, introduced them to the Jewish traditions of food and hospitality;

he also treated his mentees to lunch at his favorite Asian restaurant, thereby sharing the cultural traditions of all. The bonds created between the Eastern and Western students during this semester, the authors believe, are fertile, enduring bonds. In fact, one Asian student told the authors about an ancient Chinese saying that they still believe is true: *Once a teacher, always a mother.*

The authors would like to close with a subjective response to accompany our objective perceptions. Fall Semester, 2000, was one of the most memorable teaching experiences of our careers. It is difficult, even in retrospect, to determine whether we learned or taught more. Assuredly, our lives are enriched by this experience. In reflection, we each have memories of special events that bring the importance of the phrase, “What the professor learned in class” into a clear picture. Craven remembers a colleague stopping her one night on the way to class and making the comment, “I feel sorry for you; it must be really tough and exhausting working with foreign students.” The statement could not have been further from the truth; the challenge itself had caused us to stretch, to bring new solutions to problems, to love going to class. Likewise, Kimmel remembers one of the Taiwanese women students coming to her office with a mixture of herbs, spices, and citrus peels; the student saw that her teacher had a cold and was miserable. Having no idea what she was ingesting, she took the directions of her student to heart and sat in the office chewing the peels, bitter in taste, and learning about traditional Chinese healing. And, her cold improved the next day!

The experience of teaching and learning with a completely diverse class was occasionally difficult, but it was also delightful and exhilarating. We both believe that the greater danger for professors in the academy is *the rut*. Just as the students of today need to see the world replicated in their readings and study, we, the professors, need to experience the world

in our student populations. The rewards are such that we have arranged to repeat the class for another diverse group of 25 in the Fall of 2001. Our use of mentors, mediated learning experiences, and theory applied to global problems was sufficiently successful that we want to share it with our peers. We learned that truly multicultural classes present a learning adventure that can create an exchange of learning and cultural understanding between all the parties—students, teachers, and observers—that closely mirrors the global environment that the 21st Century offers. It is difficult for the authors to imagine a learning environment that would not benefit from, and be enriched by, such a multicultural, multilingual population.

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