

Bridging Cultural Borders: American Students’ Pedagogical Cross-Cultural Experiences in Hungary

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Abstract: In exploring the best practices for preparing new teachers to meet the challenges of the changing demographics present in contemporary classrooms, cross-cultural internship experiences emerge as an important component to teacher training curriculums. The authors present information based on the experiences of American student teachers spending three weeks teaching English and American Culture in Szent István’s Practice School, making presentations to local clubs, churches, libraries, and traveling throughout Hungary. This exchange program presented a great opportunity for the authors to conduct a study related to exploring the impact of the student teaching abroad experience in their teaching dispositions as well as in developing an understanding of working within a culturally and linguistically diverse environment.

Keywords: *cross-cultural education; study abroad internships; perspectives consciousness; immersion experience; sociocultural relationships*

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“The key to the formation of global citizens is the educator, bearing out the concept that the teacher is the most important element in the educational environment” (Ikeda xi).

In exploring the best practices for preparing new teachers to meet the challenges of the changing demographics present in contemporary classrooms, cross-cultural internship experiences emerge as an important component to teacher training curriculums (Dennis 2003; Lane 2003). According to Bruce, Podemski, and Anderson (1991), incorporating a global



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perspective into teacher education ensures that educators have the knowledge and skills to promote the development of a global perspective in their students. Byram (1994) goes so far as to indicate that cross-cultural internship experiences provide professional knowledge of the cognitive and affective change involved in the cultural learning that immigrant students experience as they navigate educational systems. First person experience has been shown as critical to intercultural development and prospective teachers’ prior life experiences. Intercultural experiences (or lack thereof), have a major influence on how one responds to diversity and multicultural education (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen and Hubbard 2006; Bennett 1993; Brown 2004; Burriss and Burriss 2004).

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), located in Southwest Florida, through its integrated education program provides theoretical, cultural and pedagogical knowledge related to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) student populations (Flores et al. 2003). As a result, FGCU’s graduates are receptive to emphasizing the importance of language-enriched environments and to respect and value the cultural differences and heritage of their students (Siwatu 2007). The integrated program at Florida Gulf Coast fuses Early Childhood, Elementary, Secondary, and Special Education teacher preparation majors in their courses and field experiences. In addition, the program includes full endorsement for English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Full-time teacher candidates move through semesters known as Blocks and in cohort groups, with multiple field experiences and internship opportunities integrated into courses.

As a result of the many complexities in today’s student population, teacher candidates must challenge and change their thinking about the core concepts and approaches of different disciplines, to see issues from multiple perspectives, and to apply the approaches, concepts, and tools of various disciplines and professions to solve real-world problems. Through the program core courses, students explore a topic or theme in depth by working on projects that call for intellectual inquiry, physical exploration, and community service. The projects result in valuable products that have the potential to extend the knowledge and work of individuals far beyond the scope of the students who created them. Students explore diversity in its broadest view throughout the program, so that they begin to expect each student to be distinctive and individual. Whatever the diversity—apparent skin color, language, physical differences, blurred cultural mores, or behavior patterns, family structure, learning styles, or indistinguishable deep cultural values—students are guided in the core courses toward knowing about, accepting and, hopefully, promoting acceptance of the value and promise of each individual.

Burn (1980: 131) contends that “exchanges of teachers should have more priority and support because of their multiplier impact, assuming experience abroad affects what teachers teach and how, as well as their perceptions and attitudes towards other countries and cultures.” In agreement with this principle and in order to provide study abroad experiences for its teacher candidates, the College of Education (COE) at FGCU initiated in 2008 an international agreement for student teaching exchanges with Szent István Egyetem in Hungary. Providing experiences through study abroad programs represent a significant investment in time and money for teacher training institutions, students and faculty participants. The focus of the exchange initiative is to encourage student teachers to think about who they are and what factors have influenced their identities. Several other aims are: to strengthen and extend the use of research based ESOL teaching strategies, to place the issues of cultural diversity in a broader global context, and to live the experience of an “immigrant” student. The program consists of American student teachers spending three weeks teaching English and American Culture in Szent Istvan’s

Practice School, making presentations to local clubs, churches, libraries, and traveling throughout Hungary. This program presented a great opportunity to conduct a study related to exploring the impact of student teaching abroad on their teaching dispositions and understanding of working within a culturally and linguistically diverse environment.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a short-term student teaching study abroad experience on the lives of four teacher candidates. The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways did a study abroad immersion experience impact participants’ awareness and understanding of culture?
2. In what ways did a study abroad immersion experience impact participants’ understanding of experiences of English as second language learners?

In addition, an important rationale for this phenomenological study is to add to the body of research on the impact of short-term study abroad internships on teacher candidates, their practice and views of culture.

Four participants, chosen from a pool of applicants based on their abilities to meet rigorous participation criteria set by the College of Education, were undergraduate Education majors chosen to participate in a three-week Internship Exchange Program between FGCU and Szent István Egyetem in March of 2010. All were students in good standing with excellent academic records, each was personally recommended by faculty members and each was successfully completing their “American” internship. The students were all first semester seniors, two students were Early Childhood Education majors and two were Elementary Education majors. Their ages ranged from twenty to thirty-two years of age. For two students, this was their first trip outside of the United States, while two others had earlier traveled to Europe on one short visit each. No participant spoke a language other than English or was familiar with any aspect of Hungarian culture. Each participant had completed nine weeks of their non-final student teaching experience in an American school and each returned to their placement schools following their three-week exchange in Hungary. The students were accompanied by the coordinator of this program and by another colleague from the College of Education.

Drake (1997), Tang and Choi (2004), and Willard-Holt (2001) cast doubts on the effectiveness of short-term internship experiences and advocate for research to go beyond the usual survey instruments that mostly inquire about surface cultural aspects. They specifically suggest that further research should include phenomenology and ethnographic methodology to explore the lived experiences of students participating in short-term study abroad programs. We believe that phenomenology offers an unbiased study of human experience and seeks to remove the outside observer from interpreting human experience. As the observer/participant in this study was intimately involved with the experience and in order to strengthen the verisimilitude of this study researcher bracketing was utilized. Phenomenology offered opportunities for researcher and participants to discover essential elements of their experiences as they were lived.

To investigate the impact of this study abroad experience a variety of qualitative data was collected at various stages of the study. Participants were asked to write and articulate their expectations in the program applications. Student teaching observation forms were used to evaluate the participants’ teaching practice while in their American and Hungarian Internship classrooms. Researcher notes from group meetings held prior and during the experience were used to document challenges faced either personally or professionally by the participants. All participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in a personal journal. Although some

topics were assigned, the primary purpose of journaling was to have a reflective record of the students’ impressions and experiences. Focus group interviews were conducted and videotaped one week after arriving in Hungary and on the last day of the experience to provide a general understanding of the students’ experiences in the international portion of the internship. Finally, two weeks after their return to Florida, all participants were asked to submit a reflective narrative.

Data analysis followed methods of Moustakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1998), methods which are recognized by researchers to be appropriate for qualitative data analysis. These researchers viewed analysis as a reiterative process of reading and rereading of the data to identify the significant statements, sentences or quotes that provided an understanding of how participants experienced a given phenomenon. Specifically, videotaped interviews were transcribed and all data was read multiple times employing a holistic, cyclical process, proceeding from the general to the specific. Recurring themes were identified and coded to capture significant experiences and member checking was employed at each stage of analysis process. The study was limited to the perspectives on the immersion program of the four student participants. Several other aspects, such as program evaluation, although they could have added depth to the study, were excluded because the study focused on student perceptions of culture, not the views of the program components, coordinator and faculty program member.

Four significant themes that emerged from this study were: participants’ realization that American media culture permeated Hungarian society; the power of language; perspective consciousness; and pedagogical understanding. The following discussion includes authentic student voices, highlighting the extent of their individual and professional transformations, as in the following example of participants’ realization concerning the proliferation of American media into Hungarian society.

Participants in this study continually noticed and questioned the presence of American pop cultural icons, music, restaurants and automobiles in Hungarian society. They struggled with assimilating the powerful influence America has on other cultures and attempted to understand the diversity of issues surrounding this global reality. Remarks shared at nightly meetings such as “I couldn’t believe it, we just pulled out of the Budapest airport and the first thing I saw was a billboard for *Lost*, then the next day we went to Eger and there was a billboard for *The Good Wife*. I saw Julianna Margulies’ face all over Hungary!” (Student 1, 2010) are examples of observations made by the participants and represent a cultural realization of the power of American media. Their observations supported the work of Merryfield (1997) who identified elements of global awareness needed to achieve cross-cultural understanding; “one must develop an understanding of one’s own culture and heritage and the role of one’s own culture in the world system if one is to achieve understanding of the multiple identities and worldviews of others.” Their new perspectives on the intrusion of American media on another culture were a topic of lively discussions where they tried to uncover reasons why American pop culture was so powerful on the world stage.

Language as a form of discourse and a negotiation of power emerged as another theme in the participants’ responses. For example a student said “I was trying to make the waiter understand that I wanted my Gyro on a plate instead of in a pita, I finally had to draw him a picture” (Student 2, 2010). Another student commented “I never realized how language and daily life were so connected until I tried to borrow the iron from the matron” (Student 1, 2010). Leistyna (2001) stated, “there is an inextricable relationship between language and culture-language being codified culture” (437).

Students responded in their journals to the following prompts: “Recall an experience(s) in this project that made you aware of the relationship between social power and language?” “Would you classify this realization as new knowledge? Explain.” Participant responses in their journal entries provided examples of social occasions where they felt “powerless, helpless, vulnerable, paranoid or confused” because of their inability to understand or use the Hungarian language. Student 2 described a situation where she felt insecure about her acceptance by a group of Hungarian students: “The only word I understood was my name, when they started to laugh I got paranoid and my feelings dropped really low, I thought they were laughing at me or something I did. I just couldn’t figure out why they were laughing.” Participants also shared unique experiences in their history where they had been unsympathetic or showed bias toward a non-English speaking student or person prior to their study abroad experience.

A particularly significant observation shared by Student 1 and Student 4 was that prior to the study abroad experience, they were in agreement with the English Only movement so prevalent in Florida, but, since living the experience of a language immigrant, they held more “sensitive,” “caring,” “sympathetic,” viewpoints on this issue. All students articulated a “new understanding of language barriers,” with two participants expressing criticism of “America’s lack of respect for other languages.” Participant reflections on the power of language supported Brown (2001: 475), who posited that “language is the mutual construction of shared meanings during interaction; it is the historical embodiment of power relations and cultural knowledge and is a primary medium of unequal relationships at the societal and interpersonal level.” The experiences of these participants seem to support this theory, and their responses during interviews indicated they empathized with the feelings of culturally diverse students in American classrooms. The ability to place oneself in another’s life encourages the ability to make isomorphic attributions or similar judgments about another’s behavior, a skill that is critical to the development of empathy, an essential component in understanding the power of language across cultures (Cushner & Brislin, 1996: 72)..

Bourdieu (1991) discusses the role of language as “discourse which instantiates and transfers both power and cultural knowledge in social relationships and sanctions the power of those who speak the language” (54). Building upon Bourdieu’s (1991) work, Merryfield (2000) and Mahon (2009) posit that first person experience has consistently been shown as critical to intercultural development, to the broadening of one’s worldview and sense of empathy for those who lack a voice. The following participant quotes emphasize emphatically this realization by study participants: “I now understand that the relationship between power and language is entirely dependent upon where you are at the time. In America, English-speaking Americans are the powerful ones, in Hungary I was the powerless one” (Student 4, 2010). “I realized that when you don’t speak the main language in another country, your self-confidence sinks very low. I felt that other people were superior to me because I could not communicate effectively. I didn’t realize before this experience that power and language were associated with one another” (Student 3, 2010). These responses provided evidence to confirm the transformations in the students’ abilities to link language, power and culture as constructions of human interactions only understood in the context of socio-cultural relationships.

The most significant learning to emerge from this cultural experience related to the concept of perspective consciousness which is the recognition of one’s view of issues or events are not universally shared, that others have profoundly different worldviews (Hanvey, 1982). Student 2, an African-American, shared a personal revelation, “In America I have had to deal with prejudices all of my life, elementary school was pretty bad but here I am loved and

appreciated and for the first time treated as a human being.” This participant’s expectation prior to arriving in Hungary was that Hungarian society would reflect the same kind of racial prejudice she experienced as a bi-racial American. This participant was familiar with the lack of opportunities and stereotypical views of Roma among the general Hungarian population and expected not to be as accepted as the other students. This student was very honest in her reflections concerning bias towards African-Americans in America and was surprised to find a “different perspective in Europe.”

Other examples of “perspective consciousness” as shared by participants in their reflections were “people kept asking me which stars I knew...” and “they thought I was rich because I had a car...” With statements like these, participants were able to reflect on their own culture and examine it from an outside window. Becoming aware of the misconceptions held by others about Americans they, in turn, began to question their own stereotypes of others, examining aspects of their own culture that had gone unnoticed. Their “awakenings” confirmed findings by Mahon, (2009), Zhai, (2000) and Cushner and Brislin, (1996) concerning the unique opportunity of experiences abroad to foster intercultural development in cognitive, affective and behavioral domains.

International internships also have great potential to impact the professional development of teachers in the areas of equipping them with new skills, attitudes and knowledge (Baker 2000; Mahon 2002; Mahan and Stachowski 1990). International experiences provide interns with opportunities to compare educational systems, become more reflective about their teaching assumptions and gain a greater understanding of global and domestic diversity (Clement & Outlaw 2001; Vall & Tennison 1991). The participants in this study were seeking to gain experience and skill in the use of ESOL strategies by being exposed to an English immersion program. In their academic coursework and their American internship they had been exposed to a range of ESOL teaching strategies and approaches; but, it was expected that they would gain confidence and new understanding about language teaching and differentiated instruction through their work in the Hungarian Immersion program. While responses indicated that participants did gain confidence and new understanding about language teaching, it seems to be their own experience as the “other” that provided the most powerful professional transformation. Participants related personal incidents of the power of ESOL strategies to help them navigate the language barrier that existed. Each participant related how these incidents had changed preconceived “attitudes they had about ESOL students in their American classrooms” (Student 1, 2010).

The following are additional recorded responses from participant interviews and narratives underscoring their growth and gained pedagogical understanding:

“My brain wanted to understand but after about five minutes it just clicked off and I began to look at the paintings on the ceiling, I had never been to church before so I had no background knowledge, I was completely lost and I began to dream. I guess background knowledge is really important!” (Student 2, 2010).

“Even with the interpreter I began to zone out, I couldn’t engage so I just quit” (Student 4, 2010).

“I became really good at watching people’s faces for clues as to what they were saying” (Student 3, 2010).

“As a new student coming here it made me realize how hard it is to function in another language. I felt really stupid and was often afraid of making mistakes. I began to observe very carefully what others were doing, this helped my anxiety” (Student 1, 2010).

“I now know that my student’s inattention is probably language related and not disrespect or bad behavior” (Student 2, 2010).

Participant responses supported research by Emmitt, Pollock and Limbrick (1996), indicating that “language is the most powerful and persuasive means humans have for making and sharing meaning” (6). Losing the ability to communicate was a unique experience for each participant. It forced them to rely on the strategies they had learned and on their own abilities to solve problems, to think on their feet and to make use of “my whole body when I teach.” (Student 3, 2010). It also supported the conclusions of Mahan & Stachowski (1990): “Inside the classroom, interns have support systems, but when the bell rings they are left on their own and must learn to rely on their own capabilities for survival” (68). Participant responses indicated that their most significant professional learning was the power of ESOL teaching strategies in and out of the classroom.

The investigation explored the impact of a study abroad experience on student teacher participants’ view of culture, language as a powerful cultural tool and their use of ESOL strategies in classroom practice. Each participant articulated new awareness of and empathy for the immigrant, those who loose the power of language as a cultural tool. Experiences of losing their own power to communicate forced them to confront their bias and assumptions concerning English language learners in their American classrooms. Their experiences at social and community functions where their inability to understand Hungarian interfered with their ability to mentally attend to the task helped them to embrace a pedagogy of care in relation to the use of ESOL strategies in their teaching practice. Participants looked at their culture from an outside perspective and began to develop perspective consciousness; becoming aware of misconceptions held by others helped participants confront their own misconceptions. As participants navigated a new “system” they became aware of the role of America and the American culture in the world system and began to realize the sacrifices made to the “taker culture” paradigm.

Freire (1998) posited that an identity emerges out of one’s cultural upbringing that is carried throughout one’s life and relations with others and serves as the driving force in the classroom. If a teacher has an awareness of herself as a reciprocal learner then “she will work toward the well-being of her students and raise their consciousness of their place in the world as social, historical thinking communicating, transformative, creative persons” (Freire 1998, 45). Each participant in this international experience became a teacher/learner, each was able to rise above “purely pragmatic training with its implicit or openly expressed elitist authoritarianism” and look at the world through new eyes. Critical practice is connected to the teacher’s ability to see all students as exciting human beings full of curiosity; beings who can give the teacher a view of the world through their eyes. Perhaps that view encompasses a new culture, perhaps that view causes one to look at one’s own culture through a new lens; regardless, this “dynamic relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire enlarges our vision of the world and understanding of those who inhabit it” (Freire 1998, 69). For these participants, the lived intercultural experience became the catalyst to gain a meaningful understanding of other cultures

as well as one’s own place in this interconnected world and is rationale enough for schools of education to support making these opportunities available to an increasing number of students.

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