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# Internationalizing Education: A China Narrative

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Confronted with the challenge of increasing globalization, the institution of education needs to answer the call and become better equipped with global dimensions in today's globally interdependent world. The internationalization of education should not remain as an optional attribute of education; rather, it is integral. In addition to emphasizing the essentiality of internationalizing education, this article, employing narrative inquiry, tells of the storied experiences of Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Houston, as well as the two authors in internationalizing education through a variety of China's experiences. It is hoped that this article can serve as an appeal to a more articulate commitment to internationalizing education from colleagues of education worldwide.

Keywords: internationalizing education, China, narrative inquiry

#### Introduction

Increased globalization not only presents many challenges to the economy, society, politics and culture, but also has important implications for education, and the institution of education has the responsibility for addressing these globalized issues. However, there is an increasing concern that educational systems throughout the world are not adequately preparing students for understanding of the world's cultures, economies and political relationships (Asia Society, 2001). Educators and students should develop the habit of thinking of global ramifications: Is this in the common good? Will this protect the rights of all people (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005)? To create a positive atmosphere, in which students are encouraged to participate in global discourse and engage in global issues in today's multicultural society, educators need to, first of all, develop multiple perspectives and understand the experiences and points of view of people different from themselves. Meaningful international education projects can help educators achieve that (Wells, 2008).

As James (2005) suggested, internationalizing education can develop a sense of interconnectedness, empathy and tolerance, which are much needed in today's world. However, though there have been some initiatives of internationalizing teacher education exemplified by the institutions, such as Ohio State University and Stanford University (Roberts, 2007), the undertaking is yet to be given due credits, as it deserves nationwide. This paper will focus on the strides that our Department of Curriculum and Instruction at University of Houston has taken in internationalizing education.

"Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). The fundamental idea of narrative inquiry into education is that education is life and experience as well. Therefore, education and educational research are the construction and reconstruction of personal and social

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stories of teachers, learners and researchers themselves. Accordingly, the responsibility of narrative researchers of education is to tell their stories, or render their experiences in meaningful ways. Adopting the narrative as a method of inquiry, this article shares storied experiences of Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Houston, as well as the two authors in internationalizing education through China's experiences.

## **Internationalizing Education Through China**

The original effort can be traced back to 1995, when the Asian American Studies Center was founded in University of Houston with the dedication to strengthening bonds with Asian/Asian American communities as well as facilitating the studies of Asian Americans. The center offers courses on multicultural issues in education, Chinese culture, economy and society at both undergraduate and graduate level, and opens up the windows of interacting with Asian countries, especially China. Additionally, it coordinates the China Study Abroad Program which provides students with a trip of two to four weeks to China to learn about Chinese culture and society in a variety of forms. Students are eligible for two to six credit hours for this study.

While the Asian American Studies Center continued its China focus, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction went other directions, mostly in Asia and then after a few years, only individual faculty engaged in international projects. Many of these projects did focus on Asia, but none on China. It changed in 2007, when the social education program initiated global and international education courses and linked to the China abroad program for a month-long trip to China. The goals of the China experience included internationalizing the social education program area and eventually the department, facilitating possible future collaborations in China, and applying the experience towards our teaching and scholarship.

The month-long China experience involved traditional tourist activities, visits to universities and schools, the integration of Chinese culture and comparative education through two courses. The majority of the experience took place in Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai. Participants were able to interact with students and professors at a university in Beijing during much of the experience. The length of the experience helped facilitate better understanding of Chinese education and culture and possible future endeavors lining our university with China.

Specific themes and issues emerged allowing for further critical investigation. After the on-site study in China and critical inquiry and reflection, White, Marsh, Mulholland and Thomas (2008), all social studies educators, began to question the traditional approaches to cultural studies by raising the question "how should culture be taught and subsequently learned" (p. 27). The everyday occurrences, some of which, though may be beyond their comfort zone, had the potential to revolutionize their beliefs and ways of being. Based upon the self-examination of their own biases and misunderstandings of culture, they called for a new mode of teaching and learning cultural studies that deconstruct "the historical layers of structural bias and self-serving functionality" (p. 31).

Three years later, in the summer of 2010, another cohort of educators embarked on the trip to China. They were students and faculty from the new executive Ed.D. (Executive Education Doctorate) program of our college of education. The new Ed.D. program was launched in 2009, which encompasses a two-year (51 hours) cohort program where students investigate urban school issues in a lab of practice leading to their dissertation. Most of the students in this program were educational leaders in K-12 or aspiring to take leadership positions in future, and among them, a considerable number were principles or assistant principles. This program was designed to provide intensive but tailored learning experience qualifying that applicants may complete in as little as two

years given their tight work schedules. On the one hand, these students brought their expertise from working in schools to the classroom. On the other hand, they would apply what they have learned from this program to their schools and communities. In response to the growing impact of global challenges on educational leaders, the program offered an international trip to allow students an opportunity to obtain a first-hand experience of diverse educational systems and cultures. China was chosen for the first international focus due to the current college projects in China and the current globalization focus on China. During the 15-day trip in China, the program students and faculty traveled to three major cities of China— Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an, visited four universities and one middle school, attended a series of lectures on China's educational system, teacher education and professional development, and exchanged with faculty and students there.

Besides, an "Issues in Urban and Comparative Education" course was required linking local to global education ideas and issues, and giving instruction and guidance to students before during and after the trip. The course took on new dimensions through the integrated use of technology. Communication was facilitated through a course website on Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), a university sponsored electronic data system. At the outset of the course, the instructor communicated and posted all the related themes, assignments, journal articles and YouTube videos on Moodle. Students reflected and replied to each other's postings extensively on regular basis prior to the China experience and for the week following the China experience. The assigned readings and introductory online discussion served as a theoretical and intellectual preparation for the China experience. During the stay in China, students kept a daily reflective journal focusing on the social, cultural and educational issues of China and US. Plus, an informal debriefing session was held at the end of the day, allowing them an opportunity to revisit the themes that emerged in the pre-departure preparation and capture the things that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The final synthesis project after the trip helped them establish a holistic and profound understanding of their new learning and experience, and in the culminating presentation attended by all the students and Ed.D. program faculty, they presented and shared how this cross-cultural experience impacted not only their philosophies and practices as educational leaders, but also their doctoral research and personal life.

## **Analysis**

We made individual and group interviews with the Ed.D. students, and examined documents, field notes, interview transcripts, student journals, online discussion postings and other course projects including review of literature and comparative paper. They were also invited to complete pre- and post-course surveys tied to the China experience. These surveys assessed participants' understandings of culture, global connections, diversity and changes in these perceptions. In order to take advantage of the diverse backgrounds of our students, we emphasized the rich qualitative data that emerged from the surveys.

All in all, China's experience has affected the students personally and professionally, which was echoed repeatedly in the conversations and interviews with them, their journals, online discussions, papers and final presentation. Personally, they have become willing or more willing to critically look at the stereotypes previously hidden in their minds, or preconceived notions prevalent in the media; they have learned to recognize and appreciate differences, abandon the search for one correct answer and become more open and receptive to different perspectives; they have learned to seek out and evaluate information from diverse sources and approach new information with an open mind.

Professionally, the two-week immersion into cross-cultural context has not only helped the students learn

the society, culture and education of China, but also provided them with an opportunity to reflect upon social, cultural and educational issues in America. Most of them have gained a deeper awareness that they could impact the world and national issues beyond immediate surroundings through their work with school administration. With a refined understanding of international education and global issues, many of them have expressed their desires to share their new learning and experience with their staff, teachers, students and community at large.

Though the course and China experience have proved rewarding in internationalizing educational leadership, we are well aware that there was a long way to go towards a more positive and visible progress. For some of these in-service school administrators, the former assumptions and stereotypes are too deeply embedded to uproot overnight.

Simply opening one or two courses or having a brief stay in another country does not necessarily lead to the internationalization of educational leadership, neither is it an all-heal recipe for global ignorance, misconceptions and prejudices. It is but one possibility to prepare school administrators to become more globally competent educational leaders. What is more vital is that internationalizing educational leadership should be embedded throughout the program as a fundamental guideline rather than seen as peripheral, and it should be integrated naturally with all the subject matters across the disciplines, instead of being presented only as a single course.

Our next-step plan includes: (1) working more on the student survey to produce an analytical brief that summarizes the results; (2) following up with future research concerning how these educational leaders are to apply their new knowledge and experience to their schools, and how effective this cross-cultural experience will be in bringing about impact on their school climate and curriculum; (3) continuing to report on the success as well as challenges in internationalizing the Ed.D. program; (4) disseminating the experience throughout the whole program; and (5) constantly being prepared for the curriculum innovation to keep pace with the latest global demand on education.

## **Other Endeavors**

During the stay in China, we, as the director and research assistant of "Internationalizing Education Task Force" of the department, bore another mission: establishing partnerships with Chinese universities and negotiating potential collaboration possibilities. Drawing upon the existing proposal of "Joint Master's of Education Degree" of Department of Curriculum and Instruction directed to Vietnamese universities, we worked out a proposal targeted at Chinese universities. It consists of 12 graduate courses, including three college core courses, six courses in a specific program area (five program areas available for students to choose from) and three electives. It is a one-plus-one program by offering half of the courses in China and the other half in the University of Houston in the US. We believe that this joint degree program, built upon the major strengths in each institution, will be mutually beneficial: As a result of the project, the prospective educators from China will develop a better understanding of American education, culture and society, and the American peers and faculty can broader their eyes through the new learning and teaching experiences and see things through a broader perspective coming from their Chinese counterparts.

Our meetings with Chinese universities turned out to be very successful: Common interests were found not only in the prospects of the proposed degree program, but also in wider collaboration in terms of student and faculty exchanges. The next steps include follow-up letters to the three interested universities in China

outlining our understanding of their needs based on our initial conversations. We will then await responses and plan for more detailed proposals, memos of understanding and future travel to China to complete the agreements. Other related projects include applying for Fullbright Project in the hope of opening a door for more educators in the local communities to experience a different educational system, culture, language and society firsthand.

### **Authors' Narratives**

### Liping's Narrative

As a student from China and as my days of living and studying in the US go on, I became increasingly aware of the lack of understanding between people in America and China. In America, though there was some talk about China in history books, the academia, or the media accessible to the public, it was not sufficient for people to develop a relatively objective and comprehensive understanding about China. Regrettably, this ancient Oriental nation still remained foreign even mysterious to a lot of American people, though it has been embracing the outside world for decades since the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s. Likewise, Chinese people lacked in understanding about America. Taking the me as an example, as a former English teacher, I perceived myself better prepared for the life and study in the US than average Chinese people, but challenges were still falling upon from various aspects, communication, social and cultural norms, mode of thinking, way of acting, etc., all I had not expected before. I have deeply realized that though China has witnessed an unprecedented enthusiasm towards learning English nationwide and the growing popularity of celebrating western festivals like Valentine's Day and Christmas among its young generation, people's genuine understanding about America still fell short. The fever of Mc Donald's, KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), and Pizza Hut in China did not make Chinese people any closer to American people and their life in real sense.

As a doctoral student of education in an American university who was born, grew up in China, received education primarily in China and taught in a university in China for three years previously, I felt a strong sense of mission that she needed to, and should be able to do something to help shorten the gap of ignorance and misunderstanding between the two peoples. It was this sense of mission that impelled her to ponder over and seek what role my former learning, teaching and living experience in China can play in helping me fulfill this mission.

Opportunities finally came when the course "Issues in Urban and Comparative Education" was opened with experience of China as an integral part and when "Internationalizing Education Task Force" was initiated with China as one of the focuses. As a Chinese student, it was incumbent on me to assist to her best ability. For the course and experience of China, I generally served as a Chinese education expert introducing about China's history, society and culture apart from education, and answering students' specific questions and confusions. For "Internationalizing Education Task Force", I helped formulate the proposal, seek potential partnership and facilitate the meetings. Currently, I am coordinating the follow-up work to get it moved along the plan step by step.

I was glad that by virtue of my own knowledge, learning and teaching experience, and network as a former educator from China, the I could function as a bridge, promoting the understanding and interaction between educators in both America and China and doing my little bit in helping educators of the both countries become more globally competent.

An individual's influence is limited. Much remains to be done towards enhancing understanding and

collaboration between the two countries, not only in educational field, but also in the variety of other domains, and this cannot be achieved by one or two individuals within a short time. It is heartening to note that numerous people of vision in China and America have been striving for the common goal at each other's position in each other's area. As a former as well as a prospective educator in the cross-cultural sphere between the US and China, I am looking forward to putting forth more efforts and embracing more promising collaboration prospects between educators of the two countries.

#### **Cameron's Narrative**

As an educator for over 30 years focusing on global and international education, my teaching and travel helped prepare for the China experiences. Numerous international education experiences in Asia, including grants, consulting, research projects and teaching, all enabled me to grow as an international educator. When the opportunity arose to reinvigorate the international education focus in our Department of Curriculum and Instruction, I jumped at the chance.

Previous experiences laid the foundational groundwork, thus, global and international courses were developed, other courses were internationalized, better partnerships were developed with the Asian American Studies Program and finally the initial experience to China was undertaken. This experience fostered further internationalizing education planning. While projects were undertaken in countries, such as Vietnam and Qatar, China remained a focus.

Fortunately, negotiations with our new Executive Ed.D. in Educational Leadership Program led to the development of a course entitled "Issues in Urban and Comparative Education", which was intended to link urban education issues in the US with international education issues culminating in an experience in China. In the summer of 2010, approximately 40 Ed.D. students travelled to China as part of their Ed.D. course requirements.

I have struggled, since becoming an educator many years ago, to better integrate a global and cross-cultural focus not only on teaching and learning, but also for general societal focus. As a social studies teacher, I continue to question blind patriotism and nationalism that often leads to an attitude of exceptionalism, distrust, and an us vs. them mentality. No matter what social studies content I teach, or what social studies teacher education content I address, a primary theme is always to integrate a global, cross-cultural, or international approach.

Methods have included using current events, an issues-based approach, comparing themes and ideas across boundaries and debates where multiple cross-cultural approaches were assumed. Allowing for case studies, small group investigations, student centered approaches and higher level activities, such as problem-based learning, have helped internationalize the curriculum. In addition, various education-related experiences abroad have enhanced the possibilities. Technology (particularly the Internet) has truly made the world closer and is applied as a most valuable resource.

Regardless, truly experiencing the world through travel is the best way to internationalize one's mind. I have been very lucky to travel to a number of places around the world with two trips to China among the most recent. The first trip was enlightening in a number of ways and enabled other possibilities to emerge including a second trip with large numbers of graduate students and meetings with various Chinese universities for potential collaborative education projects. Fortunately, the future looks great with another experience to China with a different doctoral cohort, as well as a looming memo of understanding with Chinese universities for a "1 + 1" masters program in education.

### **Conclusions**

From the establishment of Asian American Studies Center and its China Study Abroad Program, the China's experience in 2007, the Ed.D. China experience in the summer of 2010, the proposed Joint Master's of Education Degree with Chinese universities, the variety of other collaborative possibilities, other grant/project proposals, and as the authors narrated their experiences, the paper has presented the progress our Department of Curriculum and Instruction has made in internationalizing education, particularly regarding China.

In the ongoing discussion of what educators will need to be prepared for life in the 21st century, improved internationalization represents a framework for guiding that learning. We have already seen the improved knowledge, skills, and disposition a globally interdependent world requires among our participants by engaging in kinds of international undertakings, which have the potential to be a profoundly life-changing experience. We will be seeking to collaborate with more overseas educators, share our experience of internationalizing education, understand each other's contexts and concerns, and support each other's initiatives for the common goal of preparing globally minded educators.

We believe that as our tie to China's educational colleagues gets closer and closer, the endeavors of internationalizing education will obtain more momentums than ever before. Meanwhile, we are aware that much work needs to be done on the part of educators, if internationalization is going to become reality, and that work cannot be accomplished by individuals in isolation. It is hoped that this article can serve as an impetus to not only further our individual efforts, but also call for more commitment to the undertaking of internationalizing education.

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