

Experiences of Two Academics Teaching Abroad: The Impact of Culture

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Abstract

This paper explores the collective experiences of two academics teaching in Beijing, China. Emphasis is placed on the impact of this experience on personal and professional development. In addition, this paper will provide recommendations for embarking on a professional assignment abroad. Thus, by sharing experiences, challenges, and strategies, fellow academics embarking on a similar journey will be better prepared to teach abroad and, as a result, prepare students for a diverse and global workplace.

Keywords: Faculty Professional Development, Teaching Abroad, Culture, Chinese Education

Institutions generally place an emphasis in internationalization of faculty, but these opportunities are not always evident. Certainly, there are faculty who maintain a relationship with counterparts abroad or travel overseas for conferences or international studies. Other faculty participate in short-term international visiting scholar programs such as Fulbright Visiting Scholar, Fulbright Occasional Lecturer Fund, Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence, and Scholar Rescue Fund. While the lack of resources for professional development opportunities might limit the availability of institution-sponsored short-term visiting faculty programs, that doesn't mean that the opportunities are not available.

According to Gu (2018), summer schools targeting Chinese students enrolled in universities in the United States and wish to transfer the credit back to the U.S. have opened consistently since the early 2010s. These schools are a different breed of summer school in that they are organized by third-party platforms, rather than the Chinese institutions, that offer opportunities for students but also to faculty interested in teaching abroad.

JNC, an American-style summer program in China catering to Chinese-born students, targets Chinese students enrolled in universities in the United States who intend to transfer the credits back to their U.S. institution and thus speed up the degree completion process (Gu, 2018; McMurtrie & Farrar, 2013). Before enrolling, however, students must obtain pre-approval for a credit transfer from their university (Gu, 2018). Programs like JNC hire professors from American higher education institutions to teach for a few weeks in the summer. The professors' qualifications and course content are vetted by the program and, if approved, a contract is issued. The employment contract offered consisted of five weeks of summer teaching with meetings of an hour and a half every day of the week for a total of 25 days per course taught. In Dr. Soremi's case, the load was three courses in the subjects of Principles of Economics (Macro), Principles of Economics (Micro), and Money and Banking, while Dr. Garcia taught one Introduction to Oral Communication course.

Throughout the five weeks of the program, we faced personal and professional challenges that are worth highlighting along with the elements that made our experience abroad unique. In this paper we review the benefits of global teaching, cultural challenges experienced, issues in adaptation, and preparation suggestions for those considering a teaching assignment abroad.

Opportunities: Global Teaching for Professional and Personal Development

Teaching abroad increases personal and professional competence via knowledge of the self, skills, and dispositions. Research provides evidence that there is also an increase in instructional pedagogical creativity, self-learning, and genuine multiculturalism (Clement & Otlaw, 2002; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003). When teaching abroad, one learns to be creative in curricular planning and delivery of instructions due to limited resources compared to the United States (Hamza, 2010). Additionally, personal growth occurs as a result of feeling isolated, homesick, and out of place during the first weeks in the host country. These elements contribute to self-efficacy building after the experience. With that said, Gibson and Dembo (1984) reported that teachers with higher self-efficacy guide, motivate, and praise students much more (positive reinforcements).

According to Kim (2015), foreign instructors with postgraduate degrees who teach in China do so for career advancement through research and international teaching experience and/or they are seeking to explore something new and different. Similarly, the opportunity to teach in China for five weeks was seen as one from which both academics could benefit and use for development, both personally and professionally. We can agree that the benefits from a teaching abroad experience include learning how to adapt curriculum developed for American audiences to the host country; developing independence and maturity; altering of personal and professional dispositions due to the exposure to the unknown and the challenges in communication; increased cultural awareness and global thinking; self-examination and personal reflection of aspects of our own culture that may have never been examined prior; developed empathy for students with limited language proficiencies; and an increase in cultural sensitivity.

The Impact of Culture on Development

Culture is regarded as our way of life. It includes beliefs, customs, languages, traditions, history, ideas, and creativity. Culture defines the quality of our life and sense of belonging. Therefore, before venturing to a global assignment, it is necessary to identify the cultural differences that may exist between one's home country and the host country to create awareness and assess drastic challenges that might arise.

Personal Challenges

Beijing's population is dense. The mannerisms and etiquette are also different than those in the American culture; there is poor sanitation, air pollution, and constant traffic jams. Navigating the "new environment" was challenging and, at times, discouraging. At the same time, the idea of living in a developing society might be fun and exciting for those seeking for something new and different. Beijing can also be seen as energetic, full of movement, and vibrant with culture.

In adapting to the culture, we faced a series of personal challenges. These challenges included feeling isolated or homesick, language barriers, internet censorship, and limited flow of information. Being African American in China also posed some challenges. We are not sure if the Chinese reactions to seeing a Black person were fascination, curiosity, or racism, but their reaction was something that I, Dr. Soremi, was not accustomed to. Even though the Chinese curiosity is obvious around all foreigners, it was magnified because I was not a typical tourist, I was a Black tourist, which was a unique experience for them to encounter. I was pointed at; my picture was taken with or without permission; at times they touched my skin without permission

to see if the skin color will peel; children screamed out of fear when they saw me. Though, the feeling was uncomfortable, I never felt that my life was in danger. I did not perceive anger from the spectators, I could not understand what they said or while they smiled or laugh at times though.

Professional Challenges: The Chinese Classroom

We expected culture shock when being in the new environment but adapting to the classroom was a whole other story. Teaching a classroom of Chinese students was not something we had experienced before. In addition to cultural differences, we also faced challenges regarding classroom management and student learning styles. While we are used to interactivity and discussion-style lectures in the American classroom, the traditional classroom dynamic in China does not involve as much dialogue and students are constantly apprehensive to share their thoughts and ideas throughout the lecture (Chen, 2007; Skyrme, 2007; Zeng, 2006). As a result, early classroom interactions and teaching became challenging during the five weeks of teaching. Such Chinese learning characteristics have typically been perceived negatively by others in similar positions and described as “rote, silent, and a passive style of learning” (Sit, 2013, p. 1).

We learned that in the Chinese education system, the focus is more on the collective group, rather than the individual. Therefore, a classroom of between 30-50 students is not unusual. In the American classroom, we are likely to spend more time focusing on the individual needs of the students. Teaching oral communication, for instance, becomes a complex subject to teach in the Chinese classroom.

Ideally, an oral communication course is dynamic and would help students identify and address individual challenges; for the teaching and instruction to be effective, the course needs to have a degree of individualization. The fact that there were 50 students enrolled in the classroom made addressing individual needs and fears complicated when it came to public speaking. In adapting the course to an all-Chinese classroom, it was important to survey the students regarding the fears of public speaking and addressing those as a group to help them develop confidence to speak in front of large crowds. The American oral communication course is structured to have multiple in-class assignments that are used for students to practice public speaking and receive individualized feedback.

In contrast, having a class of 50 students made this method ineffective, time-consuming, and disengaging for the students. Instead, group activities where students were forced to speak to each other, such as team-building exercises, were implemented. Lectures also had to be modified to consider the Chinese classroom dynamics. Chinese students were uncomfortable answering questions or participating in class discussion. To address this issue, more content and step-by-step instructions on how to develop a speech were incorporated as students seemed to prefer information and specific guidelines.

Important to note, as well, are the cultural differences in the topics introduced in the class. The oral communication class is structured so that students select the topics for two of their speeches, informational and persuasive. As such, some of the topics selected (death penalty, support for euthanasia, cat suicide, smoking) were topics that challenged me culturally as they provided a different view on the issues than what is usually shared in the United States. Another element that is important to note as different is the grading system. Exams in the Chinese education

system hold a substantial weight. Students expect homework to be an extension of what was learned in the classroom rather than learning something new. Along those lines, Chinese students memorize content. Thus, in-class assignments or daily homework/exercises were not always perceived as important for the students.

These challenges, however, are not unique to the JNC International Summer School or an oral communication course. Kim (2015) identified similar challenges reported from foreign professors teaching in Chinese universities. For instance, other professors reported challenges with students not having a strong handle on college-level English; thus, the class had to move slower and consequently the lessons and projects for the semester were not being completed and students were not receiving an optimal academic experience in the classroom.

While some professional challenges were difficult to overcome for both of us, the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Similar perspectives have been found in the literature. Kim (2015) interviewed professors who had chosen to teach in China for career advancement and found that while they had mixed feelings about it, they mostly agreed that it was the best place for career mobility. These professors described China as a positive step toward furthering their careers. Interesting in this study was the fact that some of the professors in this study made sense of their time in China by emphasizing future career goals and plans. To us, this was viewed as an opportunity to broaden our teaching experience and build resilience through the personal and professional challenges. Needless to say, it was also an opportunity to become more knowledgeable about other cultures and become more adept to managing the diversity in the American classroom by addressing the needs of a different student population.

Interesting to note is the fact that returning to the United States, many times when sharing this experience, I (Dr. Garcia) was asked if I had been an English tutor in China, rather than a communication professor. This leads me to believe that there might still be some misconceptions about teaching internationally.

Recommendations

We consider that those who are exploring the possibility of teaching abroad should consider elements that will help lessen the challenges faced. As such, we have created a list that is not, by any means, all-encompassing but covers the general elements we considered to be important.

Seek Out Opportunities to Teach Internationally

Opportunities to teach abroad—long-term and short-term—might not always be obvious or heavily promoted throughout institutions. It is important that faculty who are interested in international professional development seek out opportunities to gain experience abroad. This is important since the American classroom is becoming more diverse and the ability to motivate and nurture these students is critical for their success and ultimately contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Additionally, being able to add teaching in Asia (China) to a resume or curriculum vita qualifies one as a global scholar, and it might have many advantages when seeking to advance one's career. The experience as well will make you an ideal candidate for guest presentation and to promote international learning.

Reflective Activities of the Experience

It is important that you find motivation to write a reflective essay/note or keep a journal of your experience. Journaling or taking notes helps process information and experiences. Similarly, it will help you reflect on your experience after time has passed. The effects and impact on teaching practices and personal development are crucial to improve on future travels and to measure the benefit from this opportunity.

Be a Good Guest of the Country

It is important to understand that, above all, you are a guest of the country and not a citizen, and it is your obligation to adapt and accept the views of the culture, rather than the host's country's obligation to accept your views. Governments from other countries do not subscribe to the freedoms granted to American citizens; thus, it is important to become conversant in the culture of the host country to understand the differences. The most obvious course is to appreciate and engage the host culture and customs.

Understand the Differences in the Educational System

Understanding the differences between the educational system in the host country and your country will minimize the challenges in the classroom and help support the learning process for both yourself and the students. Again, it is important to be a good host of the country and adapt to the culture rather than to expect the culture to adapt to your views. This, in turn, will help you become more flexible and adapt to the challenges of a diverse classroom in the United States.

Incorporate Cultural Immersion Activities

Incorporating cultural immersion activities such as excursions, meetings/pairing with the locals to become involved and engaged in the local culture and community. This will help minimize the feeling of isolations and will enhance the cultural experience of participant's ultimately increasing self-efficacy and accomplishments.

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