

The Smell, the Emotion, and the Lebowski Shock: What Virtual Education Abroad Cannot Do?

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ABSTRACT

In response to the international mobility challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have tried to shift to virtual programs in an attempt to provide continued education abroad experiences. This situation has amplified discussions about online education abroad programs as a way to address some equity issues in the internationalization of higher education. However, there seem to be few discussions about differences between physical and virtual programming with regard to students' intercultural learning experiences. Fundamentally, what dimensions of traditional education abroad programs can and cannot be replicated by online programming? Through a narrative inquiry with three international educators on their own intercultural learning experiences, this study argues that the personal cultural immersion and the associated embodied learning of complex nuanced cultural instances cannot be replaced by virtual programming.

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INTRODUCTION

Education abroad is a major vehicle for students to obtain intercultural competences. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to

students' study abroad plans. With a ban on international travel adopted by almost all countries as a measure to slow down the spread of the virus, students' international mobility came to a sudden halt. During the long lockdown period, higher education institutions around the world were forced to switch to online offering of their programs, including some study abroad programs. Due to the apparent advantages of online study abroad, such as high accessibility and low cost, it has been seen as a silver lining of the pandemic. Many educators predict that the virtual study abroad on Zoom will continue to stay after the pandemic due to its advantages (Lashbrook, 2020). There are discussions about virtual study abroad programing as a viable solution to the deep fraught equity challenge in international education. Can virtual education abroad replace in-person education abroad when it comes to intercultural learning? What are the aspects of the overseas experiences that cannot be achieved through virtual platforms? This is the question we hope to answer in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education Abroad for Intercultural Learning

Intercultural competences involve the ability to adapt behavior and communication to intercultural contexts, using a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006). Given today's growing interdependence among nations, intercultural competence is seen as an imperative for students' global success (Reimers, 2009). One important goal, if not the most important goal, for universities and colleges to engage in internationalization is to help students acquire intercultural competences so that they are able to fully participate in the international world (Stier, 2004). Universities around the world are aiming to turn their students into "global-ready graduates" or "global citizens" (Hunter et al., 2006; Paige & Goode, 2009). But what is the best approach to students' intercultural learning?

Research has shown that students' immersive exposure to different cultures through study abroad opportunities is the greatest condition to develop their intercultural communication skills (Williams, 2005). Education abroad experiences benefit university students in their development of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills in cross-cultural communication so much so that it can be a transformative experience for some individuals (Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). The main outcomes of study abroad experiences may include foreign language acquisition, an increase of intercultural sensitivity, a decrease in xenophobia, fear or ethnic distance, and improved intercultural communication skills (Parsons, 2010). One of the five most important outcomes of study abroad experiences identified by NAFSA is that study abroad fosters intercultural understanding, provides a global context, and builds enlightened nationalism (NAFSA, 2021a). A study in the U.S. shows that an interest in improving one's understanding of other cultures and countries has a positive influence on American students' intent to study abroad (Stroud, 2010). This is not to say that simply sending students on planes and getting them to another country will naturally lead to intercultural learning. Instead, carefully planned activities, meaningful interactions, and scaffolded reflections need to be done to increase chances of intercultural learning (Nguyen, 2017; Williams, 2005).

Despite its many benefits, education abroad is not without problems. There is the danger of shallow experiences and even strengthened cultural stereotypes for students if not done properly. It is also expensive, and not all students have the financial means to participate. This has created an ethical problem in education abroad as a learning opportunity (NAFSA, 2021b). In this context, virtual online programing has been seen as a possible solution to the equity issue in international education as it is cost effective and thus more accessible (Halpern, 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Ogden & Hulse, 2021). Collaborative Online International/Intercultural Learning (COIL), diverse online programs for students to communicate and collaborate with peers from across the world in real-time but virtually (Rubin, 2015), has become a catch phrase in international education, attached with high expectations of making global learning universal. Even if we assume that the economically advantaged and disadvantaged students have equal access to a high powered computer and high speed internet (which is not at all the case), are virtual programs and physical programs the same quality? Are we able to fully solve the equity issue by sending financially capable students to go on a physical in-person education abroad program and providing financially challenged students with a virtual online program?

Experiential Learning of Small Cultures

What makes cultural immersion during education abroad so crucial to intercultural learning? To answer this question, classical literature on “experiential learning” and “small cultures” is reviewed to inform this study. Dewey is one of the earliest champions for experiential learning. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) carefully developed a philosophy of experience in education. He views life experience as the foundation for learning. According to Dewey, learners are not blank slates waiting to be filled. Instead, everyone has the intellectual capacity to learn from experiences. An educator’s job is thus no other than to create an educational experience. For experiences to be educational, interactive processes of learning in a social context are important. In relation to Dewey’s emphasis on experiential learning, Johnson’s (1987) experiential philosophy also points to the importance of embodied experience as a way of knowing. According to him, our physical body is the basis of our meaning, imagination and reason (Johnson, 1987). Specifically, the meanings that we make out of the experiential environment are filtered by the schematic structures that are based on our bodily functions. Conversely, the schemas based on our bodily functions shape and constrain our understanding and reason about the world. This is how we learn. We learn through our body. Intercultural learning through education abroad is a typical kind of experiential learning. The embodied dimension is key to immersive experiences overseas. Hall (1976) used the iceberg as a metaphor to refer to the complexity of a culture. Each culture has some elements shown above the water that are easily visible to people, but much more is hidden under the water that is difficult to see.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Holliday (1999), we need to distinguish two paradigms of “culture”. The default “large culture” refers to the prescribed ethnic, national and international cultures that are by nature vulnerable to stereotypical reduction. Different from “large culture”, “small cultures” refers to small social groupings and activities

wherever there is cohesive behavior, and the focus on small cultures can best embrace cultural complexity and avoid cultural stereotyping. In students' intercultural learning, do we want them to engage in "large culture" learning or "small cultures" learning? The broad strokes of large culture differences are important for students to know as tendencies and general patterns. But it would be more important for students to realize the complexity within each large culture, to avoid sweeping cultural stereotypes, and to acquire the ability to detect, define and demystify nuanced small cultures within a large culture.

The experiential learning of small cultures is used in this paper as a theoretical framework to understand the differences between physical and virtual study abroad experiences. This conceptual framework has an ontological dimension and an epistemological dimension. Ontologically, the focus is on the complex, nuanced small cultures, as opposed to the streamlined and reduced large culture. Epistemologically, the framework endorses embodied experiences as the foundation of deep constructive learning, as opposed to deductive abstraction in theoretical learning. These two dimensions adopted as a theoretical framework allow us to foreground the issue of quality when examining physical and virtual education abroad experiences. According to Kolb (1984), good-quality learning goes through holistic cycles of experience, perception, cognition, and action. We cannot cut corners. With a focus on the quality of learning experiences, this study hopes to determine whether physical and virtual education abroad programs are equally effective in helping students learn the nuanced small cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Through this paper, three international educators at a large Canadian university, one with a PhD and the other two with master's degrees, revisit and reflect on their past intercultural learning experiences abroad against the backdrop of their current experiences engaged in virtual intercultural programming for students. Narrative inquiry, one of the five approaches in qualitative research (Creswell, 2006), is deemed to be a suitable methodology in their inquiry, given its focus on lived experiences as the ontological center in their entirety and complexity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Social sciences need fewer theories and more stories to honor the experiences of those involved (Coles, 1989). Narratology is an appropriate method for reflective inquiry, such as this current one, as 'it attends especially to individuals, particular contexts and the circumstances of individuals in contexts' (Lyons, 2010, p. 20). A typical narrative study consists of three to five participants to allow in-depth exploration of life stories (Creswell, 2006). The goal of a narrative study is not to derive theories and generalize to the large population, but to deepen our understanding of people's lived experiences. The following questions are used to guide the narrative inquiry process:

1. Intercultural learning has been seen as an important goal in education abroad experiences. With COVID-19, many education abroad programs have been offered online. To what extent do you think virtual programming can replace or replicate in-person experiences when it comes to intercultural learning?
2. To answer the above questions, could you please share your personal experiences and stories in intercultural learning while you were physically in

another country and reflect on what elements of those in-person experiences might or might not be achievable through virtual programs?

Inspired by van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach to educational research in which the researcher seeks the meaning of life through writing and rewriting about the lived experiences of self and others, the three participants were invited to write down their stories. More importantly, they were invited to reflect on their stories as well. The three participants all had over 10 years of intercultural education experiences abroad, and they all had rich experiences working as international educators to support students' intercultural learning. During COVID lockdown, they were all mandated to design and implement virtual intercultural programs as part of their work. The three participants were selected through convenience sampling at the Canadian university. We recognize that stories are constructive entities, as they are our interpretations of life experiences as well as life experiences themselves (Bruner, 2004). Thus, story writing is an inquisitive process. Through story writing, they revisit and construct the meanings of their intercultural learning experiences. It took the three participants more than a week to finish writing their stories in response to the two guiding questions. The end results are three reflective narratives with rich descriptive details and critical phenomenological reflections. We keep the integrity of the three personal narratives with phenomenological reflections as findings of this study, leaving a cross-section analysis at the discussion section. The goal is to achieve reliability by giving readers the opportunity to read the original narratives before reading our analysis.

FINDINGS

The following are the three independent reflective narratives presented as findings of this study. In consultation with three participants, they were brought to similar lengths and a title was given to each story to highlight the key messages.

The Curated Keyhole

My most obvious intercultural experience has been with Japan, a culture different enough from my Canadian culture that active intercultural learning was required. My first visit to Japan was with my high school rugby team for two weeks. Before the trip, I started learning about Japan "virtually": I read some books, rented a movie or two, took an introductory Japanese conversation class, went to a local Japanese restaurant, and started peppering my friends' Japanese grandmother with questions. I learned a bit about bowing, a few greetings, and saw photos of Japanese gardens and castles. Even so, I remember being overwhelmed when we got there. The pulsating neon-billboards penetrated my eyeballs unlike any photo or video I'd seen. The streets were full of strange smells I could never have imagined. And even if I'd seen a photo of a squat toilet and had experienced campground and back-country "toilets" in Canada, nothing had prepared me for how to position myself with a Japanese squat toilet - and none of the conversational phrases I'd learned were up to the task of asking how.

I wonder if I could have learned as much about Japan or have developed my life-long relationship with Japan if I had never physically gone there and learned only "virtually" instead? Even writing the question sounds odd - of course not! What made my physical, in-person experience in Japan so much more meaningful, without a doubt, was the randomness, the smells, the skin sensations, the on-the-spot uncertainty with no easy escape to the familiar, and that it was largely my own individually-directed experience versus an experience totally created, controlled, and curated by someone else à la virtual world. Being fully human in the world means utilizing all our senses in a complex, three-dimensional space with trillions of simultaneous potential stimuli.

Authentic intercultural experiences require randomness and immersion to allow self-constructivist learning. Immersed in another culture, we can experiment with the pieces of knowledge we discover on our own or what someone else has decided we should know, and then we discover variation and nuance covered in real contexts (e.g. subtleties in voice, gesture, situation, and even time).

My interest in Japan continued after that high school trip. At university, I took a few Japan/Asia courses. I found more opportunities to visit Japan: a student conference, a summer job, an internship, and four years on the Japan English Teaching (JET) program. Each trip to Japan brought more questions, questions that did not have definite answers. So many things were different, if not 180 degrees opposite. Verbs came at the end of sentences and pronouns weren't even necessary. Wood saws and planes were pulled rather than pushed. People mostly talked with their own groups, and had a more strict hierarchy of relationships. Rice and grilled fish were eaten at breakfast. Tiny kitchens resulted in multi-dish meals rather than large kitchens and one-plate meals. Workers seemed to work "long" rather than "hard." Years were counted from the ascension of a new emperor and had no built-in continuity to the past. ATM bank machines were only open during business hours.

It is important to recognize that physical in-person experience does not preclude virtual supplements but virtual learning often excludes physical learning. I put quotes around "virtual" above because I believe virtual learning is nothing new. It goes back to the development of writing and then through every media development allowing us to experience a time or place other than where we are right now: painting, books, photography, telephones, fax, magnetic tape, optical discs, and now digitalization. As mentioned above, I learned about Japan remotely (i.e. virtually) by reading books, watching movies, and talking to people. Thus, "virtual" learning can be a good preparation for, or supplement to, or reflection on our real-life experiences. In recent years, there has been a seismic shift in the availability of the "virtual", but these second-hand experiences are still only limited representations of reality. People still want to travel, live, and socialize in unfamiliar places. Experiencing these virtual surrogates is like scratching an itch through your clothing - it kind of works but not completely.

The virtual world limits the overlap we share with other people: we are not sharing smells, we hear different background noises, and we exist in different temperatures. The virtual world gives us a very limited view on another culture. We see that culture through a keyhole, on a flat-screen with no depth, with some sounds but no smells or touch. Virtual learning compresses meaning into efficient packets. Virtual world communication is a different discourse of communication. For intercultural learning, the virtual experience is too curated. The virtual world is too filtered and made too neat. Also, the virtual may be unrealistically kind: in real-life Japan I experienced disdain, insults, illness, and even unusual physical pain like burning my toes on live charcoal under the kotatsu table inside a freezing cold house.

These days, I am thankful for the virtual world to keep in touch with Japanese friends and deepen my knowledge about the culture but it is only meaningful because I have the physical memories and experiences. When I watch a video on Japanese cooking, I remember the counter-top propane stove and the smell of the fish market. When I look at photos of Japanese gardens, I remember sweating in the hot sun wearing soft-fabric, split-toe gardener boots and cotton gloves digging in the earth around a massive tree I was helping move from one garden to another. The physical is where humans have existed for millennia - our bodies are built to respond to the physical even as our minds are developed to think about it. They are a perfect combination.

But I wasn't just learning about Japan; I was learning about culture and the inter-cultural. Japan was a catalyst forcing me to see more variety everywhere. If there was variety in even a supposedly homogenous Japan where it's not uncommon for people to say "ware ware nihonjin..." meaning "we Japanese... do x, or think y, or believe z", what kind of variety is there in Canada that I'd been missing? My parents and I live in different cities in Canada. These days, we do share many

things virtually (telephone, text, video calls) but only, I think, because we can imagine many aspects of a shared physical world. When I talk to my parents about their morning walk or they send a photo - I can imagine the smells of cedar and fir, the sound of river ripples, the cars along the road, and the scratch of the black berry bushes. But, as time passes without sharing physical space, the interactions become more vague and less immediate.

Similarly, when we see back-country camping blogs, photos, or videos, we can imagine the silence of sitting beside a glacier fed lake broken by a swarm of annoying mosquitoes or even verbal disagreements over which path to take or whose turn it is to get water. However, when we try to share advice and suggestions with friends who want to try camping in Canada, all the photos and videos and words in the world cannot convey why it is important to take toques and mitts and heavy sweaters when the temperature forecast is 20c during the day. And nothing can prepare people for the fatigue that an extra one kg of gear in a pack can cause over five days of hiking up and down steep trails. Communication, including intercultural communication, is about empathy. It is about being able to imagine yourself in the physical environment of sounds, touch, smells, and tastes of the other. It is also about imagining the discomfort of others in your own familiar spaces so you might help make their lives better, i.e. compassion. It is hard to conjure some of these feelings virtually if your body has not physically experienced them before - and those sensations need constant recharging to remain relevant.

A few years ago, a Japanese friend in a small town where I lived said that the first three Canadian JET program teachers in the 1990s (me included) were generally remembered fondly and kept in touch with people in the town but connections with later teachers petered out quickly after they left, if they were even strong during their tenure. We hypothesized many reasons but settled on the internet and virtual world as a major culprit. We early ones lived there in pre-internet times when even telephone calls were prohibitively expensive so we had no bubble of familiarity to retreat to and isolate from the local (e.g. email, streaming media, social media). We didn't have endless videos or websites explaining someone else's view of Japanese culture or what we should learn and see, and do, and cook. We therefore spent more time interacting with people in awkward and unusual situations because our choices were to participate in something with someone or not at all. As long as the virtual world is a source for conversations, or an inspiration for exploring, or an aid to understanding, it is fine. But it is dangerous as a replacement for those.

The Bite-sized Chunks

I grew up on the Canadian prairies with the idea of Sunday roasts, with potatoes and gravy. It was shortly into my stay in Japan when I started to crave a roast and all the fixings. A British friend and I built out a plan to subject our Japanese friends to one of our culinary norms. I went to a large supermarket chain to buy the meat, only to discover that they did not sell a piece of meat larger than a very small steak, by Canadian standards. At that time, I did not know much Japanese, but I knew the word for meat, and my numbers, so after catching the attention of the butcher, I started stacking the mini steaks together, saying, "meat - one", with some obviously failing gesture work. A kind Filipino woman with very good Japanese came to my rescue. She made the description to the butcher for me. The butcher came out with a full quarter of beef, and had me draw a line with my finger to say how much of it I wanted, then through translation, asked how I would like it cut. When I responded I did not want it cut, the look of quizzical astonishment was accompanied by the single word "Why?"

My ten years living and working abroad, mostly in Asia, taught me as much, or even more about my Canadian background than it did about the host cultures I was living in. Through a multitude of different little stories I found myself constantly contrasting my expectations with my lived reality abroad. Why can I not buy any form of cheese at the large supermarket? Why is it socially acceptable for people to let their children defecate in the garbage can in a busy shopping center, or on the curb outside a restaurant? Why, upon meeting a best friend in an airport, after a long absence, with the excitement positively infectious, is physical contact still avoided? Why is a

fast-food chain wedding even desirable? Why is there no paper currency larger than a \$10 bill? As Edward T. Hall (1959) suggested, culture hides much more than it reveals, and it hides most effectively from its own participants. It was through small moments of dissonance in every-day events overseas that I was able to identify glimpses of my own perspectives, and how I prioritized the world around me. This to me is the essence of intercultural learning.

There are clear benefits to using digital media for intercultural learning: it can introduce a higher-level overview of theories and challenges; it definitely has cost benefits; and it can offer access to a wider audience, in bite-sized manageable chunks, like the size of meat cooked in Asia. But the virtual means will never be able to recreate the nuance and depth of an in-person immersive experience. The learning connected to emotionally charged stories feels more poignant when you are the central character in an event, enveloped by the full range of the sensory experience, rather than separated by a two-dimensional screen, that can be turned off quickly, causing you to disengage and return to your own comfortable normal. There is great benefit in immersive contemplation within a space that is not entirely comfortable nor reflective of your created expectations.

Some “Why?” questions can be explored by experiencing the space, place, and environment a culture thrives in. This builds appreciation for both positive and negative factors that underpin and inspire many cultural patterns. Coming from a country where a line-up is used, there is a simple order – next up gets service. On the face of it, a queue at an outdoor market in Shanghai looks like a mad rush, with everyone waving money at the vendor’s face, expecting service, but within that press of people there are dozens of smaller social dynamics at work, such as how much space one person takes up, how to fill the spaces that open in front of you, social graces for those that you let move in front of you – including much unspoken communication to indicate that. The skills to catch the eye of the vendor, who is somewhat keeping track of the mass of people, offering a more equitable level of service, than my Canadian eye picked out within my initially perceived chaos. A similar experience of finding order in a perceived chaos might be using the Tokyo train system during rush hour. In either case, the press of humanity was something that hit a more primal chord, and I remember clearly going through stages of fear, frustration, and anger, but once the patterns became more evident, eventually I moved through to acceptance and normalcy. Repeated exposure to certain elements helps things to set in better. Cultural awareness then turns into cultural adaptation.

First-hand knowledge builds empathy, and wonder, and allows for a more fulfilling understanding of many cultural queries, as you draw from your own holistic sensory and emotional experiences. I think it is a fairly common rhetoric that Japan has good service. Tipping is not part of the system, and still I felt I had more attentive and positive service than most of my North American examples. But it is the smaller nuances of the services in action that made it hit home for me. The details of action can be explained, such as the warm damp face cloth offered with tongs (like you see through the first-class curtain on an international flight). This is offered at most sit-down restaurants. One is even offered to wipe your dash when you are filling up with petrol. Of course, this is something that you can easily offer through a digital space, but it is considerably harder to describe the pleasantness and the emotional state of those offering the service. There is a pride in the job that is seen through the interactions, the politeness, and the patience. Authentic intercultural experience is emotionally charged. Poignant cultural connection has an attached emotional connection.

At some point, as your intercultural exposure and awareness grows within another culture set, everyone has a need for an intercultural broker, someone to help you to make sense of your perceptions and experiences, and help to add some underlying meaning to the way things are in a cultural space. For many, the best form of this is a friend providing real time feedback to culturally bound communication practice within a given shared context. In most cultural settings, shared experiences are an effective way to build and maintain strong lasting friendships. With the addition

of barriers like distance, time zones, and digital interactions, the quality and depth of that friendship can start to suffer. The distance means that we are not fluent in the daily experiences of each other, nor within the social influence, such as local news, TV, and music tropes. I believe that within my own friendships, the depth of the relationship built while living in the same space has created the longevity of our friendship. Notably, they are still considerably better than my relationships that have solely been built through online platforms.

Intercultural competency is a process, not a product. As it is a process, there is more efficacy in having a personal connection to the stories and dissonance that is being worked through. What is offered in an online platform is a predetermined version of how the presenter views their own cultural space. In my experience, both being a traveler through another cultural space, and working with those wandering my local cultural space, what we choose to focus on and discuss rarely align. It is within the cultural clashes and surprised or frustrated questions of “Why!” that both sides of the local and interloper relationship have the most to learn. If the digital traveler is limited to just what I want to show them, the opportunities for intercultural growth is limited. Without the chance to personalize my own intercultural experiences, build my own relationships, collect my own stories of dissonance and environmental influences, I do not feel I would be nearly as invested in my own intercultural advancement, nor would I be the person I am today.

The Lebowski Shock

At the end of July 2011, after I received my Doctoral degree from Beijing, I arrived in a western Canadian city to pursue a postdoc opportunity. It was a different experience to open a bank account in Canada. You do it at the window in China, while in Canada I was invited into a room. It was confusing to see all the different items in the grocery store. I asked a lady working in a grocery store what “canola oil” was, and she said “canola oil is oil from canola”. I did not think it was polite to ask “what is canola?” There was a small theatre close to the university. I walked by it one day, and saw the poster for a free movie. It said free admission after the donation of a “non-perishable food item for the Food Bank”. I understood the word “non-perishable” from “Publish or Perish”. As for “Food Bank”, I did not know what that was. I assumed it was an ATM machine for food. Wasn’t that called a vending machine? I found everything expensive in Canada, so a free movie sounded very good to me. I got the cheapest non-perishable item in the store, something called “Craft Dinner”. It was on sale for about a dollar. It looked like noodles with a bag of sauce. But why white sauce? It was not appetizing to me. Anyway it worked and it got me into the theatre.

But something was very strange that night. All the people showed up in bathrobes and sandals. And they all wore sunglasses. Many had long hair and long beards, either real or fake. I learned about Halloween as a Western holiday when people dress up to go “Trick or treating”. But it was early August, far away from Halloween. I did not understand what was going on until the movie started. They all dressed up to look like the main character, someone called “The Big Lebowski”! But was this guy really important here? How come I never heard about this person, nor this movie, while I was in China? He was a slacker who did not take life seriously. He did not have a job. He went bowling all the time. He drank all the time. He swore all the time. The most expensive item in his rented apartment was a rug and he seemed to care a lot about it. But somehow people here admired him and they could even memorize and echo the lines he said in the movie. Was this an important part of Canadian culture, or North American culture, or the Western culture that I never learned? I did learn before that North American culture was a more relaxed culture. But I thought “relaxed” meant wearing jeans and T-shirts. I did not realize it could be this relaxed. I guessed there were so many things that I did not know about and I did not learn in my English classes in China. Everyone else enjoyed the movie, but I did a lot of thinking while watching the movie.

To really think of it, my Lebowski shock is different from the Culture Shock that most people know and talk about. The Culture Shock seems to be more concerned with the large culture, the ethnic and national culture in broad and more generalizable patterns. A good example of the

large culture is Hofstede's (2021) cultural dimensions, such as individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance versus ambiguity tolerance, strong social hierarchy versus weak social hierarchy, task orientation versus people orientation, and indulgence and restraint. The Culture Shock can be seen as bigger shocks, experienced by people totally alien to a culture with little previous experience with it. The Lebowski shock that I experienced is rather the shock with more nuanced small cultures that a culture 101 course would not mention. I did not have much of a language barrier in the traditional sense. I had my honeymoon with the English culture long before I came to Canada. I watched English movies, English TV shows, read English books, and took courses to learn the culture behind the English language. But I was still shocked in some small but significant ways after many years' language and cultural orientation before I came. The Lebowski shock is the shock that makes me see the complexity of culture, as it may be counterintuitive or even deconstructive to the broad stereotypical understanding of a culture.

September came and the new school year started. The teacher education research center that had me as a postdoc had a routine activity. All graduate students and some faculty members gathered every week to talk about the progress of their research projects and the issues that they had come across in their research. It was like a learning community where we were supposed to give and get professional help in a group. One day, a Master's student from Iran shared her idea for her research project. She wanted to study Iranian women and how their freedom and human rights were deprived of by the Iranian government. Weren't there too many Western critiques on Iran, on China, on Russia, from Western perspectives? Was she trying to live up to a dominant Postcolonial Western discourse on the rest of the world? Should I say something about this?

While in China, I heard many times from many sources that the Chinese are more indirect than Westerners in our communication styles. We were often self-critical about it, believing that our practice in beating around the bush is a waste of energy and is inferior to the more direct Western way where black is black and white is white, and things are kept simple. The Chinese indirectness is a way to protect people's face and feelings, and the need to protect people's face and feelings makes the Chinese unable to become critical. I thought to myself, "I am in Canada. I should cut out my Chinese crap, be direct and be critical." I said to the Iranian girl that her idea for her research was a racist, imperialist, structuralist, modernist idea, and a very boring idea too. I received an email from my Canadian professor after the meeting, suggesting that I crossed a line and what I said was not consistent with the supportive and constructive culture at the center. Given time, I learned that Canadians are the most polite people on earth. It is very hard for Canadians to be direct in giving negative opinions. The most negative thing they can possibly say is "This is interesting"! I was a complete jerk at the meeting.

If I had not come to Canada, and I only learned about Canada in my English classes or through online virtual programming in China, my experiences with Canada might have stayed more at the Hofstede level, not down to the Lebowski level. I might never have the opportunity to experience the Lebowski shock, to experience the complex and nuanced cultures in Canada which served to shake my stereotypical thinking about the two different cultures. I might still think that the Canadians are direct and the Chinese are indirect. What if I had a super critical cross-cultural educator who could point me to the complexity of cultures and help me move beyond the large culture stereotypes? But it would still not give me the same sensations when I was in the Canadian movie theater, the Canadian grocery store, and the Canadian seminar room. I may be quick in agreeing with the professors about cultural nuance and complexity as a concept, an idea, but what that really feels like, I may never know.

DISCUSSION

What are the major themes underlying the three reflective narratives? Is virtual programming a viable alternative to in-person study abroad experiences? All three international educators point to the embodied dimension of physical education abroad experiences as the most essential basis for

intercultural learning. The embodied immersive experiences allow people to use all their bodily senses in perceiving the target culture, with the smell, the skin sensation, and the noise, thus achieving a perfect combination of body and mind in learning. Successful intercultural learning is seen as best achieved through a self-constructive learning process, an emotionally charged process with the learner as the central character in a cultural event. It is more impactful on the learners and it tends to result in more transformative change in the individuals. The discomfort felt helps the learners challenge their assumptions derived from home experiences. Successful intercultural communication is seen as empathetic understanding between people, and empathy between people is mostly based on common physical memories. Shared experiences while living in the same space is a foundation for lasting intercultural relations. Virtual experiences, on the contrary, are experiences “on a flat-screen with no depth.” They are not three-dimensional, with no smell and no skin sensation, with no rich cultural contexts. And to experience another culture virtually is like scratching an itch through the clothes.

All three international educators recognize the complexity of culture beyond stereotypical categories, and the complexity of culture is best perceived, understood and appreciated through physical experiences in the culture. The randomness that comes with individually-directed experiences allows learners to see the contextual nuances of place, people, time, and many other factors at play in a cultural event. Such complexity perceived will serve to deconstruct the conveniently packed cultural stereotypes that we hear around us all the time about others’ cultures. Immersive experiences, coupled with critical reflections, give learners the Lebowsky Shocks which enable them to see the complexity and nuances of each large culture and to experience the numerous small cultures within it. In addition, repeated immersive exposure helps the new culture set in better, turning cultural awareness and understanding into cultural appreciation and adaptation. Virtual international educational programs, on the contrary, cannot avoid the limitation of compressing cultures into efficient packets, in small bite-sized chunks, only allowing students to see a culture through a “keyhole.” Table 1 summarizes the major attributes of physical study abroad experiences for intercultural learning and to what extent they can be replicated by virtual programing:

Table 1. Major Attributes of Physical Study Abroad Experiences and Their Replicability by Virtual Programing

Major attributes of physical study abroad experiences	Replicability by virtual programing
1. Physical study abroad provides three-dimensional, immersive, self-constructive learning of other and self’s cultures;	No.
2. There is randomness, uncertainty in physical study abroad with no easy escape back to comfort zone;	No.
3. Intercultural learning during physical study abroad is sensory-based, emotionally charged, and more poignant;	No.

4. Common physical experiences give rise to stronger cultural awareness, cultural empathy and intercultural relations;	To some extent
5. Space, place and environment provide clues for nuanced, deeper and unbiased cultural understanding;	To some extent
6. Physical immersion is more conducive to the learning of small cultures, the discovery of cultural complexity, and the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes.	To some extent

The pandemic lockdown has given us the opportunities to see the advantages of virtual programs. Zoom meetings are a valuable addition to our repertoire of tools for intercultural learning. The real-time, interactive, and “face to face” dimension of video conferencing technology makes it a better tool than the asynchronous, passive, and faceless tools we had in the past. It allows us to learn about another culture, to interact with people from another culture, and to hear what an expert in intercultural studies has to say much better than any time in history, at a much lower cost and a much higher level of accessibility. Virtual intercultural learning shall continue, just like the reading of books about other countries, the watching of movies about other cultures, and the interactions with people from other cultures in our home country shall continue. Virtual education abroad should be promoted as it can help improve the general intercultural awareness and general intercultural competence of the student population. It can, to some extent, improve accessibility of intercultural learning.

However, the physical program and the virtual program are qualitatively different when it comes to intercultural learning (not online gaming or online shopping), something international educators must acknowledge and accept. Getting students to share experiences and observations through COIL is valuable learning, but it is still second-hand learning that is filtered by others, not first-hand experiences through personal immersion. Virtual programs cannot replicate the embodied learning of small cultures in physical in-person cultural immersion. There might be opportunities to blend the two in one program to enrich the learning experiences, but we would be fooling ourselves if we believe that we have solved the equity issue by providing all students with opportunities to participate in education abroad virtually. Virtual programming is not an alternative to in-person education abroad, and it is not the answer to the embedded ethical issue of international education. Inequity will continue to exist and the solution would not be a technological one. It would be the most unethical thing to do for international educators if we believe that virtual conferencing technology has solved the ethical challenge of international education.

CONCLUSION

Motivated by the uneasiness we have felt upon hearing the discussion about virtual education abroad as a solution to the equity issue in international education after COVID-19, this study aimed to explore the qualitative differences between traditional and virtual study abroad experiences. Cultural immersion through embodied in-person experiences is a key dimension of traditional education abroad programs that promise students’ in-depth, contextual, and comprehensive intercultural learning. Despite the many advantages of virtual online programming, such as low cost, flexibility and accessibility, it is still qualitatively inferior to physical in-person programming and thus is not a solution to the long-standing equity issue with international education.

Though teleconferencing technology can be fruitfully used in intercultural learning as a new addition to existing tools, it cannot replace physical programs, nor can it fully address the equity issue.

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