UNPACKING: AN INTERNATIONAL TEACHER’S EXPLORATION
INTO LIFE AND LEARNING ABROAD

by

Megan Bond

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of globalization, people and cultures are coming together like never before. As an international teacher, I am an example of this phenomenon. After six years abroad, the last three working at an international school in Mongolia, I returned to Canada noticeably changed and struggling to understand the impact of my experiences. Limited literature on the international teacher experience has led me to engage in this self-study in which I use methods of narrative inquiry to better understand my personal journey of learning and change over the three years that I lived and taught in Mongolia. As I unpack my journey, the artifacts that I remove from my backpack trigger memories of the moments that hold significance. I further ‘unpack’ my vignettes, drawing out the issues that have impacted my changing identity. As newly qualified teachers seek positions in the competitive Canadian job market, the international arena remains an appealing option. It is my hope that this project will serve to instigate self-analysis in the reader and serve as a focal point for discussion on issues that could arise while living and teaching overseas.
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I do not bring back from the journey quite the same self that I took.

- W. Somerset Maugham
INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Rationale

With the growth of globalization and increasingly global relationships, people and cultures are coming together like never before (Roberts, 2009; Wang, Lin, Spalding, Odell, & Klecka, 2011). I am an example of this phenomenon. Having always been what some may call a “free spirit” – an inquirer with an insatiable curiosity about the world and humanity -- it was a natural decision to venture overseas to begin my career as an educator.

After two years teaching in the United Kingdom, I knew that I was ready for a change, nay, a challenge. I wanted to teach somewhere truly foreign and unfamiliar, a place where I would not only teach but also learn and grow as an individual navigating the world. My search led me to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and for three years I taught, travelled, and was immersed in one of the most enriching learning experiences of my life.

My time in Mongolia came to an end when I decided to move back to Canada to pursue a graduate degree. Upon arrival, and for months following, I found myself enveloped in what I identified as an intense period of reverse culture shock. As time went on, I could not ignore the questions that ceased to subside: Why do I feel this way? Do I belong here? Who am I in this place? How have I been changed? What has caused this change in me?

During this period of reflection, I felt the need to go further, to delve into the heart of my experiences in the hope that I might better understand how I arrived at this new place of knowing and being: my newfound identity. This desire led me to this self-study.
While adjusting to life back “home,” I sought answers to the questions that plagued me. I found very limited literature on teaching internationally and nearly next to none on the personal experiences of international teachers, their wellbeing, identity, learning, and transformation. 

Surely, I am not the only one to have ever had these questions, I thought. When looking for answers in scholarly journals and publications yielded scarce results, I considered a different resource: myself. I decided to look inward and use my own personal experience as a data source for the purpose of this project. It is my hope that this project will serve to instigate self-analysis in the reader, and serve as a focal point for discussion on issues that could arise while living and teaching overseas.

Self-Study

“He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.” – Lao Tzu

In the past 40 years, educational research has undergone transformation, which has come to include self-study as a legitimate research method. The emergence and subsequent acceptance of self-study can be attributed to the convergence of at least four developments in educational research: growing naturalistic inquiry, the rise of the Reconceptualist movement, the increased involvement of international scholars in teacher education research, and the re-emergence of action research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

The introduction of naturalistic and qualitative inquiry methods called for the redefinition of validity as trustworthiness and argued for research subjects to be viewed in a new light, as temporal, indeterminate, and dynamic beings. As a result, context, process, and relationship have become more of a central focus of inquiry.
Integrating science and research with the study of the self was an idea that came to light in the seminal work by Ross Mooney (1957) in which he brought attention to “The Researcher Himself” as an entry point for addressing the drama within educational phenomena. Viewing research as a personal venture, Mooney claimed that it is “worth doing for its direct contribution to one’s own self-realization … to get out of experience its most poignant significance, its most full-throated song” (p. 155).

The rise of the Reconceptualist movement in curriculum studies also influenced the growth of self-study as a valid form of research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). This period marked a shift away from the traditional taken-for-granted bureaucratization of schooling to a more critical examination and exploration of the nature of curriculum in its broadest sense (Pinar, 2012). The method of currere (Pinar, 1980, 1981) was introduced as a means of achieving self-understanding and social reconstruction through a ‘complicated conversation’ in which the relations between academic knowledge and life history are studied and scrutinized.

Another influence on the emergence of self-study has been the growing involvement of international researchers in teacher education and the contribution of diverse intellectual traditions (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Phenomenology and the nature of experience were brought from the Netherlands, as Van Manen (1980) shared his interest in uncovering meanings in everyday existence. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) narrowed in on teachers’ narratives, pushing for awareness of the narrative nature of knowing and the place of story in the development of teachers’ understanding of self and practice.
The growing popularity of action research in the field of education has further influenced the incorporation of self-study. Although traditionally situated in empirical social science research, the focus of action research has broadened in recent years with the boundaries between research and reflective practice becoming more blurred (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Foucault offered a rationale for self-study research by recognizing the link between the person and the play of power in identity and self-formation (Colin, 1977). He recommended, “if one is interested in doing historical work that has political meaning, utility and effectiveness, then this is possible only if one has some kind of involvement with the struggles taking place in the area of question” (p. 64). Therefore, data that elucidate what it means to be a teacher should come directly from the source, the one who experiences this world first hand – the teacher. Concomitant with the study of teaching practice is the study of the teaching self. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) note the truth of self-study: “that to study a practice is simultaneously to study self: a study of self-in-relation to other” (p. 14).

Self-study researchers maintain that the quality of a self-study lies in the balance of attention paid to the self and the space between the self and practice, as well as the others who share the practice setting (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). A self-study focused too much on the self becomes narcissistic and produces solipsism, yet becomes too much like conventional research when focused on practice. For the purpose of this self-study, I am conscious of balanced representation, sharing narratives that reflect my own personal and professional learning while purposefully making the attempt to tell a story that is accessible to the reader and has the ability to enable meaningful reflection.
Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is increasingly used in studies of educational experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I can think of no better way to study my experience as an international teacher than through narrative. I have always contested that “everyone has a story” (or two, or ten). Those stories are the snapshots that make up the album of our lives and are glimpses into the architecture of our identities. Identity is linked to narrative understandings of knowledge and context (Clandinin & Huber, 2002). It is a composition of storied experiences, a story to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Huber, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1999), which is shaped in places and lived in places, lived in actions, relationships, language, silence, gaps, continuities, and discontinuities.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) describe story as a portal, a means for interpreting one’s experiences in the world and for uncovering meaning. Through the recursive and hermeneutic processes of narrative inquiry, the self and the reader are able to step through that portal into a world of the imagined past, present, and imagined future when the process of analyzing phenomena becomes like an excavation, an uncovering of artifacts and features that embody experience, knowing, and being.

Simply put, narrative inquiry involves making sense out of experience, making sense out of stories, and making sense through stories. Meaning can derive from the story itself and from how it is told, including the techniques, style, form, and the feelings it evokes. To uncover meaning means to pull back the layers and pay attention to the nuances that are embedded in the story. This type of research demands particular kinds of wakefulness that are a part of analysis that is multidimensional, recursive, and complex in nature (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007).
Narrative is more than just a story. It is multidimensional, with the teller, the told, the context, the conditions, and the intentions for narrating all playing a role in the creation of meaning and understanding of a phenomenon of importance in the world of the writer. For educators, narrative inquiry can be a powerful tool, a starting point for authentic research, allowing one to navigate those experiences that seem to stick out and hold significance. They could be issues that re/occur throughout one’s professional journey, sites of struggle, or “nodal moments” (Graham, 1989), that are central to teaching and learning to teach. Fowler (2006) describes narrative inquiry as an approach that uncovers those moments of difficulty that resonate in practice and ferment at the site of the teaching self. It is a humbling process whereby the acknowledgment of difficulty and subsequent analysis may serve to inform future practice. The difficulty that emerges is in itself a curriculum of which to study. Educators who adopt narrative inquiry processes become more present in the generative space of their practice, acquiring the ability to connect with, understand, and have compassion for all of those who are engaged in learning more about what it means to be human.

So I look back at my own personal and professional journey thus far, narrow in on those memories that seem to stick out, and begin to unpack those moments that resonate. Some are moments of difficulty (Fowler, 2006), some of pleasure, and others, for whatever reason, just want to be noticed. It is through the process of narrative inquiry, my pedagogical hinge (Ellsworth, 2005), that I am able to locate those snapshots in time that hold significance – milestones that have impacted my continuously evolving teacher identity – and discover hidden truths and insights that will serve to enlighten my future professional path.
Method of Analysis – The Three Commonplaces

Narrative theory allows people to make sense of their lived experiences while also making sense of the stories that reflect those experiences. It involves a hermeneutic cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation where the researcher examines an experience from some perspective (Patton, 2002). Narration is a “threshold activity in that it captures a narrator’s interpretation of a link among elements of a past, present and future in a liminal space and fleeting moment in time” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 162). My story is an autobiographical account of a time in my imagined past. It is my story, from my perspective. I have retold some of these stories many times, to various audiences, and because of this retelling I have repeatedly reconstructed the experience, and thus have continued to make meaning over time and along a continuum of experience. What must be honoured is the notion that the knowledge developed from narrative is not fixed or final but constantly changing, reforming, and incomplete. It is a process. What is told now is understood as it is at this moment in time and in this place, surrounded by this environment. What is revealed in a story today reflects how one knows the self today, based on one’s own analysis of events and experiences thus far.

Human consciousness undergoes continuous change and development as we participate in the activities that form our social lives (Moen, 2006). In this sense, narrative inquiry should consider the value of what can be learned by examining “the process,” and, in turn, discover one’s evolving self, “for it is only in movement that a body shows what it is” (Schribner, 1985, pp. 64-65).

This concept of flow and process characterizes the way in which narrative is analyzed. Narrative researchers Connelly and Clandinin (2006) developed a method for analyzing narrative
that would guide researchers in the study of a phenomenon. Borrowed from Schwab’s (1978) writing on the commonplaces of curriculum – teacher, learner, subject matter, and milieu – Connelly and Clandinin imagined the three commonplaces that would make up a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – temporality, sociality, and place. The commonplaces serve as checkpoints, places for directing attention, but must be used simultaneously as they work together to allow discovery of meaning in the narrative. Essentially, it is a conceptual framework that analyzes experience through a temporal lens, where thoughts and feelings play with time and place.

**Temporality**

Narratives are reconstructed memories of past events, recalled in the present, and impacting the future. It is important to try to understand people, places, and events as in process, always in transition (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The manner in which time plays out in a narrative can reveal much about the quality of the experience, and, in turn, allow for interpretation of meaning.

**Sociality**

Meaning can also be interpreted through the personal and social conditions of a narrative. “Feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) all play a part in describing how an experience has affected the narrator. The social conditions under which experience and events unfold draw attention to the milieu, factors, people, and forces that form the context surrounding an individual’s context.
**Place**

Experience happens at a specific time and place. Narrative incorporates descriptions of place to help build up the walls of context and to invite the reader to imagine a time in the past. The concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places may change as an inquiry delves into temporality (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). It is important to examine each place described in a narrative and to consider the impact of those places on the experience, in relation to time, feelings, and conditions of the context.

**Multiple Truths**

“Say not that I have found the truth, but rather that I have found a truth.” – Kahlil Gibran

Narrative research is a “reading of the world” (Fraser, 2004) and in this world there are multiple realities, and thus multiple possibilities for representing stories. Narrative inquiry does not attempt to produce ‘the right’ knowledge or ‘the truth’ but seeks to persuade the reader to buy-in to one of many plausible truths and to see the multi-layered meaning embedded in a story.

Examining the temporality, sociality, and place of experience through a recursive process – a repeated re-entering and re-examining of the text – allows the researcher to delve deeper to explore meaning and to uncover multiple truths. The role of the narrative researcher is not to tell but persuade the reader to believe in a multiplicity of truths to a story. This goal is accomplished by employing methods of “thick” or “rich” descriptions (Fraser, 2004) and by using language that does not attempt to convince but instead presents in a way that is more tentative, circular, and multiple (Borland, 1991; Hyden, 1994).
I approach my narrative research from a place of humility, with respect for “the other” and the possibility of the multiple truths that might lie in my ongoing and never concluding narrative of my life abroad, for it is always subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation at any point along the continuum of the imagined past, present, and imagined future.

I write and inquire from a place of conviction, where I believe a story deserves to be told, and learning can evolve. I enter into my own process of self-discovery with the hope that you, the reader, might find yourself immersed in the learning process right along with me, gain insight from the experiences that have imprinted themselves on my personal and professional selves, and through the analysis of the time, place, and sociality of each narrative, form new understandings of what it can be like to teach in a foreign country.

The Vignettes

There were thousands of personal, social, and cultural moments in which I participated while living in Mongolia, but the vignettes that make up the following chapters are the ones that want to be told. Thomas King, a professor of English at the University of Guelph, describes the delicacy of storytelling, in that “once a story is told, it cannot be called back … it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories that you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (King, 2003, p. 10). I keep King’s advice close to me as I negotiate the stories that rise from my memories and find a place in this written document. There have been moments of discomfort and even hesitation at the thought of putting my thoughts and feelings about my cross-cultural experience to the page, but I remind myself that learning, new knowledge, and enlightened understanding come from a place of discomfort, for we can only grow when our discomforts propel us forward towards discovering new truths.
Confidentiality

As Thomas King warns, “you have to be careful with the stories that you tell,” and so I heeded his warning by carefully protecting the identities of the people and places highlighted in each vignette. Pseudonyms have been used throughout each vignette, and some of the details have been altered to conceal the identities of the people and places that shaped my experience in Mongolia. The stories were also undertaken with ethics clearance from Queen’s University.

The Questions

At the end of each chapter, after I have unpacked the vignette and drawn out the issues, questions are included to inspire reflection. The questions can serve as a tool for discussion among education professionals or they can serve as prompts for personal reflective writing while considering international teaching, before departure, or ongoing as part of one’s reflective practice. The idea here is to understand the self (the local), including personal beliefs, values, stances, assumptions, prejudices, and privilege, before facing the complexities that accompany a new foreign experience (the global). Reflective activities can be of great benefit to educators considering a cross-cultural experience. Van Manen (1990) describes lived experience as a “breathing of meaning” and having a “certain essence, a ‘quality’ that we gain in retrospect” (p. 36), and suggests that reflective writing interacts with experience as it “teaches us what we know, and in what way we know what we know” (p. 127).

I now welcome you to join me as I unpack my experience, drawing out memories and recalling the events that have made a significant impact on my evolving identity.
PROLOGUE

I cross the street, walking towards my new house. I am back in Kingston, although this time I am in a different place.

I walk up the path towards the house and find myself deep in thought, reflecting on the walk home. As I reach the steps I think about my experience at the traffic light where the people obediently waited to cross the street, observing the countdown until they were prompted to cross. I am not used to this.

I walk up the first step. I think about my fascination with the clean, uniform sidewalks and perfectly manicured lawns. To me, they are immaculate and pristine. Have they always been this way?

Second step. I think about the woman walking her dog, leading it with a rhinestone leash and dutifully cleaning up after it. I think, is this right?

Third step. I think of the houses I passed, with landscaped gardens, paved driveways, and custom painted front doors. I wonder, do I belong here?

I continue through my front door and into a living space yet to be lived in. Cardboard boxes, luggage, and remnants of another place and time are scattered throughout the rooms. I know that I must continue to settle in and find places for my belongings so this place may eventually begin to feel like home.

I feel unexpectedly apathetic towards the idea of assembling my newly acquired furniture or unpacking the boxes containing hand-me-down household items. I stare at
my new kitchen table lying in pieces on the floor. Pieces. Parts of a whole waiting to come together. Waiting to become one again. Useless until assembly. I feel a pang of empathy at the sight of this, and instead of attempting assembly, I wander into my bedroom, searching for a task that will satisfy my soul at this moment. I scan the room … no, not the bed frame … those boxes can stay where they are … and then my eyes gravitate towards the far corner of the room and halt on the object propped up against the wall. I feel the warmth of familiarity as I walk towards my large and trusty travelling backpack …
THE BACKPACK
“I’d like to offer you a position at our school for the upcoming school year.”

...

“I’m moving to Mongolia.”

...

”Mongolia? Where is that exactly?”

...

“It’ll be the challenge I’m looking for. I’ll be fine. This is what I want.”

...

It is August 14, 2008, and the months of planning and anticipation have all come down to this moment. Touch down. I am officially in Mongolia, the elusive remote country that nobody seems to really know much about. And I am here! My head is buzzing and I feel the slight twinge of butterflies as the plane skids and slows on the invisible runway. It is past midnight. I should be asleep. My body knows it should be asleep, but it is wide awake despite the 36-hour journey, two stopovers, and less than adequate in-flight service. I am not afraid. I feel ready for this new beginning. I’ve been preparing for this since I signed my contract. I’ve read the books, watched all the films I could get my hands on, and now I seem to have acquired a heightened awareness for anything related to Mongolia. Although I have a good idea of what to expect, I know that nothing can prepare me for what lies ahead.

The plane hasn’t yet stopped at the gate, and I can hear clinking of seatbelts unbuckling and clicking of overhead compartments opening. Passengers all around me fetch their
belongings and trudge down the aisle towards the front of the plane. I wait for my turn to enter the aisle. A man made of muscle passes by and then a mother dragging her young son behind her. He stares at me as he trips down the aisle trying to keep up with his mother’s pace.

Stale air and a slight aroma of sour milk welcome me as I disembark and find my way to passport control where, with no exchange of words, I am granted permission to enter the country. It’s official.

With three pieces of luggage piled high on my trolley and my passport tucked away for safe keeping, I take a breath to ease my nerves and enter the arrivals waiting area to a crowd of brazen Mongolians. Some appear to be waiting for travelers and others push towards me insisting their services. “Taxi! Taxi? Taxi!”

I find the strength and assert myself with a shake of my head and avoidance of the eyes, all the while reassuring myself that I have tucked my valuables away in a secure place, away from thieving hands.

I see foreigners just like me through the crowd and push my trolley towards them, hoping they are the ones who can rescue me from this barrage of intimidating men who spit when they speak.

... 

By the time the school driver arrives at my new apartment I am well acquainted with a few of my new colleagues who have joined me on the bumpy ride from the airport.
In the still, dry darkness of the desert night, I gather my belongings and my life, and settle myself into my apartment, wondering what I might confront when the daylight welcomes me to this new place.

*****

This is how my journey begins. An object, a simple material object, an artifact with a special power to transport an individual back in time, to re-experience the past, a memory, a place of significance. My backpack, full to the brim and yet to be unpacked, is the first of many artifacts that trigger a memory and a story to tell, bringing to the surface those hidden elements that played a role in the evolution of my identity.

**Metaphor**

I use my backpack as a metaphorical focal point for my narrative. Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) describe metaphor as having exploratory power, and an ability to structure information and articulate teachers’ experiences. Metaphors can generate meaning, be used as a means for representing new learning and for communicating messages, which are difficult to access in explicit language (Zhao & Poulson, 2006). As a heuristic device, metaphors become a valuable tool for exploring the unknown and leading to the discovery of illuminating new insights. They also provide perspective for navigating the unfamiliar by using something familiar as a frame of reference (Pugh, Hicks, & Davis, 1997). According to Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997), “metaphors give imaginative expression to personal practical knowledge, making it
possible for a person to explore hidden intellectual avenues contained in a metaphor’s frame” (p. 671). The use of metaphors can also provide a transformative, constructivist experience in fostering deeper understanding (Greves, 2005).

My backpack represents my journey as an international teacher. Having travelled abroad and now positioned in the corner of a room in a house in Canada, it has come full circle. The backpack, with all its flags signifying lived experiences in far-off places, holds the knowledge of many lived experiences that might piece together the big picture of my years living and teaching in Mongolia.

At the beginning of the prologue, I describe a simple act of walking home, yet it is evident that this act of walking home has affected me in a way that has caused me to feel uncomfortable, instigating a disillusioned sense of place. I describe my reactions and feelings that arise as a result of interacting with my environment during my first day back in Canada. I return to phrases that suggest a feeling of displacement such as I am not used to this, and I wonder if I belong here.

A simple act of walking up steps and into a house is slowed down by the detailed description of the events that have perturbed me during my walk home. The events I describe are simple everyday occurrences that are a part of the fabric of daily life in Canada. The importance of these events becomes more evident in the following chapters, where aspects of life in Mongolia contrast those described in Canada, thus highlighting the cultural differences that have played a part in the transformative nature of my experience.
I begin by stating that I am back in Kingston, meaning I have returned to a place where I used to live. It is a familiar place – the buildings, streets, landscape, and businesses have not changed – yet I am aware that I am in a different place. This statement is a telling one. In 2004 I used to live in Kingston, in a different house, in a different area of the city. On the surface, I am in a different place, can simply mean that I have returned to live in a different house, but as I stop to absorb those six words I feel the depth and explore the deeper meaning. I am in a different place physically, but also symbolically. Although this place, my home country, is familiar to me, who I am in this place is unfamiliar.

To a Westerner, my walk home might seem mundane and unaffecting, yet I describe it as a disconcerting experience. What was once ordinary and routine is now disorienting, causing me to feel out of place and that I do not belong. One might wonder why is this the case. How have I come to arrive at this place?

In my new home (only in theory), settling in is an unsettling task, and I have no interest in unpacking the boxes or assembling furniture. There is a sense of resistance in making this place mine and committing to this place when my heart and identity are still in Mongolia. I am torn between two places, and this sense of disjointedness is apparent in my empathy towards the disassembled table, in pieces and waiting to be whole again. Useless until assembly.

Still unsettled from my walk home and feeling that I do not belong in my new home, I yearn for something to satisfy my soul. Seeking resolution I am drawn to my backpack, which is familiar and comforting, as it has travelled with me, been a part of me, been a part of my transformation. Then it happens. I am taken back to the beginning and re-experience how it all
began, from the moment I am offered a position to teach in Mongolia to the night of my arrival in Ulaanbaatar.

I begin to literally unpack my backpack to metaphorically unpack my experience as a teacher overseas. I use this metaphoric language to communicate my interpretation of my experience abroad and to illustrate a deeper conceptual system grounded in my socio-cultural world (Zhao & Poulson, 2006). By unpacking my backpack, I am “unpacking” my experience, taking a closer look at the artifacts that have imparted new ways of knowing and altered my identity.

*****

What are your reasons for choosing to teach overseas?

How does one mentally prepare to move overseas?

How do you know if you’re flexible and adaptable?
The blue colour is hard to see under the many flags that have been sewn into the fabric, representing the countries that I have visited. As I approach my bag I scan those flags: Croatia. New Zealand. Iceland. Cambodia. China. I stop on the flag of the country that was my home for the past three years: Mongolia. My fingers graze the blue, red, and yellow thread on my way to unlatch the straps. And I begin to unpack …
CHAPTER 1: HASHA
I am in that in-between stage of sleep, no longer dreaming and becoming more conscious of the sounds, smells, and sensations of reality. Before I open my eyes I can feel a dry burning in my throat. I wonder if I am getting sick and then I remember I am in a new country, a new climate – I am in Mongolia! I dismiss the messages from my groggy body urging me to rest and instead dash to my apartment window to view my new surroundings.

...

I am buzzing with anticipation when I leave my apartment complex. As I walk towards the school, I stop and absorb the warmth of the sun and soak up the importance of the moment. Now in a new place, I acknowledge that this is the first day of the next chapter in my life. This city, as dusty and dry as it is, will become my new home and the people here, my new friends. I am on the brink of a new beginning. This place is a mystery yet I am exhilarated by the thought of exploring it, seeing a new landscape, experiencing a new culture, and feeling the sense of awe that accompanies unexpected situations and challenges.

...

I face my first challenge when I arrive at my new classroom and find it empty. If there is any sense of awe in this moment, it is overshadowed by a twinge of panic. The administration reassures me that my supplies will arrive eventually, but in the meantime I can join the school’s driver and search the city for the resources I need for the start of the school year. I remind myself that this is exactly the unexpectedness that I have been anticipating, so I try to stay calm and think of possible solutions. My Mongolian teaching assistant, Bayar, asks me what I need and what he can do to help prepare for the first day. I laugh nervously as I list the resources,
supplies, and teaching aids that are ubiquitous in the schools I’ve known: bulletin board decorations, Math manipulatives, posters, charts, carpet, Guided Reading table, chart paper, calendar, construction paper, markers, storage containers. ... I finish my list and pass it to Bayar who looks just as surprised to hear my long list of unrecognizable items as I am to see an empty classroom.

Jackie, another new teacher, pokes her head in the door and calls, “Come quickly, the school van is leaving for the city!” I rush to scoop up my belongings and ask Bayar to create a word wall for the classroom while I am gone. He agrees, and after brief instructions, I dart down the hallway to join other teachers in the school van for our first trip to the city centre.

... 

In the seatbeltless vehicle, I cannot help but giggle as our driver speeds down the broken and bumpy road and we all bounce on our seats like popping corn. He swerves around pedestrians who weave through the passing traffic in order to cross the road. I steady myself and focus my attention on the sights out the window:

Dogs run loose along the dusty road. I wonder if they have escaped from their owners.

Instead of four-walled houses made of brick and mortar, gers\(^1\) fill the neighbourhood. Smoke escapes through the long pipe that shoots straight up through the centre of the structure. I wonder how anyone could survive the heat inside a felt-covered home in the hot desert-like conditions of the Mongolian summer, yet I am just as curious to know how the inhabitants survive the frigid Siberian cold of winter in such a simple tent.

\(^1\) nomadic homes with rounded lattice frames covered in felt, also known as yurts
Children carry large, cylindrical, plastic jugs to and from the local pump. I think of the bottle of water I stashed in my bag before I left the school and wonder how far they have walked to retrieve fresh water for their families at home.

Our van slows and I see through the windshield that our journey to the city centre has been delayed due to a herd of goats making their way down the road. “Ha! I love it!” I proclaim, and instead of groaning about a delay, I occupy my time searching for the cutest kid in the herd.

The traffic thickens the further we drive into the city. Dirt paths turn into trails of scattered bricks that sporadically come together to resemble a sidewalk. Crowds wait for the city’s dilapidated buses to stop. I am taken aback when I see swarms of people pile onto buses that appear impossibly overcrowded.

Two women carry a large bag of coal between them, each grasping one handle. My stomach jumps to my throat when I see an elderly man, hunched over with a large bundle of branches resting on his back, walking towards an open manhole, and without any noticeable regard for the danger ahead. But instead (and to my relief) he evades the drop, as does the texting teenage boy behind him, and the two women carrying the bag of coal. I think of Canada and how a safety hazard, such as an open manhole, would cause a pedestrian protest. But here, holes in the ground appear as frequent a phenomenon as maple trees in Canada and the locals do not seem bothered at all².

We arrive at the heart of the city centre, where the notion of designated driving lanes is just that – an idea, a theory. Inching forward, almost in sync with the brisk jerks, I hear a

---

² Manholes are the passageways for the homeless who live underground and close to the pipes that heat the city buildings, which is especially critical for survival during the frigid winter months when temperatures can drop to -40 degrees Celsius.
policeman repeatedly blowing a whistle while directing traffic. We jerk forward and halt. Speed forward. Stop. Forward. Stop. Gas pedal to the floor. Stop. Gas pedal. Stop. Gas. Stop. Gas. Fumes. I am nauseous, but the sound of our driver yelling at the driver in front of us distracts me from my discomfort.

Two hours pass, and our search for supplies becomes increasingly like a bad joke. Our driver brings us to a shop, we enter, wonder where the secret door is located that will take us to a ‘real’ supplies shop. We try to communicate through our haphazard and dreadfully comical body and sign language what we are searching for, but conclude that what we need is not here, so we halfheartedly pile back into the van, permeate the polluted haze of the city, and try to find a more appropriate shop.

Although hours continue to pass as we negotiate our path through the city traffic, I do not seem to notice the time. Patience is not necessary when each second looking out the van window at life that passes by yields a new and compelling sight:

A weathered old man lies across a curb and I infer from the empty vodka bottle clutched in his hand that he is most likely still alive. Through the space between the passing Hummers and occasional Mercedes-Benz, I can see a weathered young woman sitting cross-legged with a paper cup raised to the passers-by and a naked baby curled up in her lap. The dust, rocks, broken sidewalk, and run-down building facades make the city appear as if it has been hit by an earthquake and is awaiting restoration.
Soviet-style apartment buildings disappear as we turn down a street aligning the ger districts and reach the battered shacks and weathered gers that make up the slums of Ulaanbaatar.

The van slows in the traffic and Jackie says, “Look at those fences! They look like they are about to collapse.”

“They are hasha,” states Phil, a colleague who has lived in Mongolia for many years. He explains the importance of the hasha, the fence that surrounds a ger. “Without the hasha, Mongolians really don’t have any right to the land. They must put up a fence to designate the land as their own, as their home.” The fences that we see in the area appear to be made with a variety of materials. We slow down as we pass a hasha distinctive in its design – entirely constructed out of steel vehicle frames. Phil’s words resound in my head. Without a hasha, one has no place. I imagine claiming land as an urgent act for the people, to search for materials to mark the land as one’s own. Staring at the property with its makeshift fence, I imagine a family scrounging to find anything to form their property, their home, their security.

... 

Hours later, after our shop tour around the city, I return to school and to my classroom. Deflated, anxious, and still slightly nauseous after our fruitless search for materials to claim my place, my classroom, I am shocked when I walk through the door and discover what Bayar has done. The word wall he has created is displayed and appears so proportionate that I conclude that he must have used a ruler and measured every single part to perfection. It is better than anything I could have imagined. Lining the shelves (that he must have reallocated from another
room) are containers for storage, supplies, and books. Looking more closely, I realize he has used empty printer paper boxes, cut them for appropriate use, and covered the boxes with coloured paper to make them more aesthetically pleasing. Breathing more easily in the dusty air, I feel a wave of comforting relief knowing that, with Bayar, I will be able to build my hasha.

*****

The photo of the hasha takes me back to my first full day after my arrival in Mongolia – a day marked by a range of extreme emotions and sensations: excitement, awe, nausea, amusement, frustration, shock, anxiety, and relief.

As the narrative opens, I am in a semiconscious stage of sleep, not aware of my place. I am straddling a metaphorical border between two separate worlds: the home country from which I’ve come and the new foreign land that I will eventually establish as my new home. The narrative captures the exact moment when I realize that my life has changed in a major way - I am in Mongolia! Attention is given to those first moments when I acknowledge the significance of the day, the first day of the next chapter in my life. Like a child on Christmas morning (or anyone who wakes to what will be a historic day in one’s life), I am too excited to rest and, like that kid rushing to her Christmas presents, I dash to the window to view my surroundings and the exotic country of which I know very little.

A little later, as I walk towards my new school, I stop to absorb the moment. Time slows as I consider my future in this new place. For many, a new beginning can be scary, but at this
moment, on my first day, I am exhilarated by the unknown that awaits me. The unknown can bring unexpected situations and challenges, which, for many travelers can be sources of fear, but, at this stage in my journey, I expect to experience them with a sense of awe. As the narrative unfolds, I do encounter challenging situations. The dusty, dry climate, a goat herd obstructing traffic, open manholes, reckless driving, a lack of safety, and difficulty communicating with the locals are examples of daily life in Ulaanbaatar that, to many, would cause stress and anxiety, but on my first day the occurrences are novel to a newcomer like me and I accept the unexpected.

Time passes without much notice as I become drawn into sights of extreme wealth (e. g., Hummers and Mercedes-Benz luxury cars) juxtaposed with extreme poverty (e. g., beggars and homelessness). One journey through Ulaanbaatar city can paint a picture of the socio-cultural landscape, contrasting much of what I experienced during my walk home in Canada (see Prologue). In Canada, drivers and pedestrians obediently adhere to the traffic laws, driving when the light is green and walking when the white man appears to give permission. In Ulaanbaatar, traffic lights mean very little to drivers, as do driving lanes, and this disregard for road rules means pedestrians must dodge passing vehicles to get to the other side of the street. Feral dogs run loose in Ulaanbaatar, while in Canada, dogs are treasured pets, walked by their owners who adorn them with special attire (such as studded leashes). Mongolian children travel from their gers to collect fresh water from a local pump, while, in Canada, an abundance of water flows from sprinklers that hydrate landscaped gardens. Clean, uniform sidewalks and perfectly manicured lawns are a stark contrast to my description of Ulaanbaatar’s broken dirt paths, broken-down buildings, open manholes, and scattered bricks. The contrasts are great enough to shock any new settler yet I remain relatively curious and positive throughout the day.
There is an undertone of urgency throughout the narrative, mainly noticed in the rush to find classroom supplies, but also in my description of how I imagine the nomadic plight to claim land. I am new, a foreigner, homeless like the nomad, yet eager to secure my place and feel a sense of security after my long journey and milestone move to such an unfamiliar territory of the world.

Returning to school, I describe myself as *deflated*. The need to feel more settled and secure in my new surroundings overshadows the elation and optimistic anticipation I feel earlier in the day. The anxiety that accompanies my futile attempt at assembling my classroom and establishing my presence fades to relief at the sight of Bayar’s work. Like the resourceful Mongolian who built his hasha out of steel vehicle frames, Bayar searches, creates, and repurposes materials to create a space that feels a little more like a place where I belong.

Transitioning from one country to another is never void of psychosocial challenges. To better understand my behaviour and the emotions I experience during my first day in Mongolia (my need for a sense of place, my excitement, my frustration), it is helpful to examine the nature of cross-cultural adaptation, including the various stages of adjustment (and readjustment) that are part of the process.

**Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Culture Shock**

*Initial culture shock*

I awake on my first day in Mongolia with a sense of wonder and excitement. I am eager to explore my new environment and exhilarated by the unknown that awaits me, even the challenges. I relish the importance of this time in my life and absorb the pleasure of anticipation.
Everything around me is a new discovery. I am transfixed by my new environment. I want to see everything. Even experiences, such as the hazardous drive, are novel and entertaining. These feelings of excitement, exhilaration, curiosity, and enthusiasm are characteristic of the initial phase of the cross-cultural adaptation process and what many researchers (Adler, 1975; Berry, 1994; Brown & Holloway, 2008) describe as the beginning stages of culture shock.

*The “honeymoon” stage*

A move from one culture to another is a significant transition in anyone’s life, bringing about a range of cognitive, emotional, and physiological reactions to new environmental stimuli (Furnham, 2010). Upon arrival and during the initial period of the transitional experience, the new environment is viewed with an inquisitive and eager approach, often accompanied by feelings of elation and euphoria (Adler, 1975; Hart, 2012). Individuals in the initial stage of the adjustment process, often referred to as the “honeymoon” stage (Hart, 2012; Oberg, 1960), feel captivated and fascinated by the new culture and maintain a positive frame of mind as they navigate the new environment (Brown, 1980; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1960; Lysgaard, 1955; Torbiorn, 1994). I am immersed in this “honeymoon” stage of cross-cultural adjustment during my first day in a country so different from my own home country, when everything around me seems new and alluring, and I am enchanted by the sights seen through the van window. I notice the contrasts between Mongolia and Canada with a heightened sense of awareness and react to challenges with atypical positivity. However, according to researchers (Adler, 1975; Allen, 2003; Oberg, 1960; Torbiorn, 1994), this initial stage of cross-cultural adjustment quickly gives way to a period of distress known as culture shock.
Culture shock

Introduced by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1960, culture shock is generally defined as the process of adaptation that inevitably occurs when living and working in a foreign culture (Adler, 1975; Hart, 2012; Okpara & Kabongo, 2011). Symptoms of culture shock, like stress, dissonance, and discomfort, arise out of an individual’s attempt to adapt or adjust when commonly perceived signs and symbols, social norms, and routines from one’s own culture no longer apply in the new cultural environment. Day-to-day activities become an all-encompassing learning experience, much like a child learning new concepts for the first time. The act of food shopping, for example, might require a great deal of new learning about how the new culture views and handles money, as well as the customary practices involved in social transactions. The time, patience, and energy required during this period of adaptation can be taxing, adding stress to the ordinarily mundane practices of daily existence. Simple acts become emotionally and physically exhausting ordeals making immersion into a new culture feel like a shock to the whole self. It is a cognitive, emotional, and physiological experience (Joslin, 2002).

Finding equilibrium

Often depicted as a W-shape (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1960), the acculturative adaptive process that is experienced by all travelers is viewed as an adjustment/readjustment period full of ups and downs until, eventually, equilibrium is maintained. After the initial period of excitement and euphoria, the real stress and shock hits as the novelty of the new place wears off and the stresses of everyday life in a foreign land lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, disorientation, and physical and emotional fatigue associated with practicing new behaviours (Adler, 1975; Brown & Holloway, 2008). A period of partial recovery occurs after the second stage of
maladjustment when the subtleties of the new culture become more familiar, communication becomes easier, and dissonance gives way to the development of multiple worldviews, leading to a period marked by adaptation and acceptance when an individual functions less like a ‘foreigner’ and is capable of assimilating to changes and accepting the unfamiliar. Eventually, the process repeats when individuals return home and readjust to their home country culture.

In this narrative – my first day in Mongolia – my process of adaptation has begun. All around me I see new sights and begin to notice the difficulties that abound when my own cultural expectations are incompatible with this new environment. Although excited to be in this new place, it is still not home to me, and not a place where I belong (yet). I am disoriented. I want to feel more settled. I want to feel like I have a place. Like the nomads building a hasha to claim their space, I want to build mine, and, as I unpack the narrative a little more, I can see that I learn my first important lesson of my journey: that a source of security and sense of place lies within my friendship with resourceful and supportive Bayar. I am not alone in building my hasha.

*****

How much do you know about the culture into which you will become immersed?

How is the new environment different or similar to what you know, like, or dislike?

What are your own cultural beliefs, values, behaviours, and assumptions in relation to the new culture?

How do you cope with stress? What can you do to help you cope with the stress of culture shock and adaptation?
CHAPTER 2: RICE PAPER PAINTING
The first bell rings to mark the start of another day of school. The boys and girls, mostly Mongolian nationals, are busily readying themselves for their third day in Grade 3. Between the slams of locker doors and the click clacking of the black uniform shoes across the classroom floor, I can hear small conversations occurring in pockets of congregating individuals.

I welcome my students and begin what will become our regular morning routine: greeting each other, taking attendance, sharing news, and changing the calendar. As I speak, I cannot help but wonder if they understand everything that I am saying. Although more at ease since the first day of school, I still see my students as timid learners, tentatively navigating an environment where the landscape and language are unfamiliar.

We commence with the day’s schedule, returning to our “All About Me” posters that were begun the day before. As Bayar and I rush from child to child, it becomes quite evident that the children require plenty of reassurance and assistance. In spite of the extra needed attention, they are remembering to raise their hands when they need help, and I feel pride in observing their obedience to my instructions. That pride is overshadowed when I notice a child slumped in his chair and not working at all. Bae, one of the few Korean students in my class, sticks out from the others who are moving from one task to another. The pencil that he once held in his hand lies across the blank poster paper atop his desk. With his elbow on the desk and his head rested on his hand, he is closed off from the world and looking increasingly miserable.

“May I help you, Bae?” I ask.

No answer.
I look at his poster. Untouched. I look at his face. Unresponsive. He looks like a child who believes the world has turned against him and thrown him out to sea, and he is looking for the life raft. I call Jin-Sang, another Korean student, hoping that his proficiency in English will allow him to act as an intermediary. Jin-Sang translates for me as I ask questions and offer to help Bae with his work. Bae remains closed off and I cannot understand why.

... 

At morning breaktime, the children line up and wait for Bayar to guide them through the hallway and out to the playground. Still concerned and feeling increasingly helpless, I watch as Bae, still detached, drags his feet as he follows his classmates, hesitantly conforming to the routine of the school day. He is the last child out the door.

While the class is outside, I sit at my desk thinking about Bae, feeling guilty that he is unhappy in my classroom, and frustrated that I haven’t been able to connect with him. Concerned, I walk across the room and, through the classroom window, I watch as Bae wanders aimlessly around the playground, with sunken shoulders and hands firmly planted in his pockets. Through furrowed eyebrows, he looks up to peer at the metal gate at the far side of the yard. The security guard greets a visiting car, and I notice Bae watch as the gate is slid open to allow for the car to drive through. He resembles a trapped animal and, for a moment, I suspect that he is fantasizing about escaping from his cage.

... 

Days pass, and I become increasingly concerned that my efforts to communicate with my students are not working like I want them to. Techniques I’ve used in the past seem to have lost
their effectiveness, but it is Bae’s unrelenting melancholy that dampens my spirit more than anything else. I try to help Bae, eliciting help from my other Korean students, and meeting with his parents to discuss my concerns, but it seems that nothing I am doing is making progress. Anxiety grows inside of me as my competence is challenged. I tell myself that he just needs time to settle in, to get used to the routines, and to get used to me.

... 

On the Friday morning at the end of the second week of school, I feel my stress level rise as we begin Math. Bayar helps to translate much of what I say into Mongolian for most of my students. I wonder if the concepts are getting through in the same manner as I am trying to teach them. A burning resides in my chest and grows stronger with every incident of miscommunication. I feel my face flush as I stumble with my words, evaluating the effectiveness of my delivery. Bayar translates. I scan their faces hoping to detect comprehension. The usual three students offer to complete the questions I have posted on the board, and I grow even more frustrated knowing how easy the lesson would be if my students could understand what I’m saying to them. I sense the barrier between us rising. I take a deep breath to avoid drowning in my own self-doubt and to tame the burning in my chest. I glance at the clock and the burning returns when I realize how much of the period has been consumed by review.

Ten minutes pass and I am waiting for volunteers to attempt some advanced questions that I have written on the board. Blank faces. Silence. Burning.

A hand shoots up.
Before I have the opportunity to acknowledge him, Bae is up from his spot on the carpet and bolting to the white board. With marker in hand, he completes the addition question with supreme confidence. The tension in my chest subsides when I see something from him that I have not yet seen. A smile.

...

It is the third week of school and I watch as my students eagerly locate a spot to sit on the carpet. Many have beckoned me to sit next to them, and I settle on the nearest spot from where I am standing. I am not the teacher this morning but have happily turned the role over to Bae and his mother, who will teach us all about Korean culture.

“An-young,” Bae teaches.

“An-young,” we echo and practice greeting each other in Korean.

Smiling and with head held high, Bae proudly displays his rice paper painting of the Korean alphabet for all to see. I join him at the front of the class and, together, we tape his painting to the wall next to the English alphabet. I turn around and look at my class who are listening intently to Bae’s mother describe the Korean harvest festival, Chuseok. Even though I know that only some of what she is saying is getting through to my Mongolian students, I know they are learning nonetheless. We are all learning.

*****
For the average teacher, the first month of a new school year is tiring, marked as a settling in period and dedicated to setting expectations, establishing routines, and developing relationships. But for a teacher at an international school recently moved to a developing country, it is certainly not just a settling in period for the students.

Numerous books and articles can be found that advise educators on how to manage that precious first month of a new school year, including classroom management strategies, organizational ideas, community-building activities, and creation of inclusive climates. Teachers can prepare their classrooms for their students, and help to transition those who have migrated from foreign countries. Students from foreign countries may need extra care to feel like they are welcome and belong, but what about those educators who migrate and become the foreigner in the classroom? Do they also need to feel like they are welcome and belong?

This vignette focuses on the dynamics of communication and understanding between teacher and students during the first month of school, particularly in a unique context when the teacher represents the minority culture. The first month of school is a time when members of the learning community attempt to find their place, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of purpose. While most of my students are engaged in the typical activities of establishing oneself in the class, a Korean student, Bae, remains withdrawn, unresponsive, and visibly disconsolate, and I become increasingly distressed as my attempts to help him yield no positive results. My own anxiety grows as I question my ability to communicate with all of my students. Do they understand what I am saying? Is what I am teaching to them being absorbed?
As time elapses throughout the first two weeks, I doubt my competence and question the effectiveness of my pedagogy more and more. I feel increasingly helpless as the language barrier continues to rise like water until I am drowning in a sea of my own self-doubt. I am treading water, struggling to keep my ‘head above the surface’ in a classroom where I am meant to be a leader, a guide. Yet I feel like the sole foreigner, misunderstood and alone. Bae’s behaviour reflects another individual in the class who feels distant and alien. Like me, he is new to the environment and not able to interact effectively with the majority of the class who are Mongolian. Neither of us feels like we are able to make connections, but a question remains, is it just a language barrier in our way?

Emerging from this vignette is the theme of feeling misunderstood. In my attempt to understand Bae and his behaviour, I call on another Korean student, Jing-Sang, to help me communicate with him, thinking that the solution lies in translation. When a translator fails to remedy the problem, I stew over the mystery and watch Bae on the playground, searching for clues that might explain his behaviour. Moreover, I also feel misunderstood. As the visible minority in the classroom, speaking a language that is foreign to my students, I question my pedagogy and wonder whether or not I am effective in teaching a class consisting mostly of Mongolian and a few Korean students. My own anxiety caused from feeling misunderstood by my students is juxtaposed with Bae’s difficulty settling in. Although the language barrier is an issue, it is only a superficial problem in this vignette.

There is a glimmer of hope when Bae and I find a channel through which to communicate: Math. I am not suggesting that Math, per se, was the solution, but rather an area with which Bae is familiar and confident. He finds his place in the classroom when the
challenging Math problems on the white board call to him like an old friend, drawing him out of his spot on the carpet and thrusting him into a new role as an active participant in classroom activities. Noticing his smile and how advanced Math brings Bae to break out of his protective shell, I experience a sense of relief knowing that a breakthrough has occurred in my classroom. This moment marks the beginning of a new approach that opens up the channels of communication and nurtures understanding, which, in turn, brings about a sense of belonging and ownership within the learning community. This new approach is observed at the end of the vignette as I join my students ‘at their level’ on the carpet and allow Bae and his mother to teach us about the Korean culture. Bae, with head held high, shares who he is and where he comes from. Communication and understanding did not necessarily come from speaking the same language but, instead, by allowing Bae to share his culture, his past, his traditions, and his personal artifacts like the rice paper painting, a portal into his identity. Now, secured on the wall, the rice paper painting represents the culture of my Korean students and communicates to them that they have a place in the classroom.

I learn in this vignette that getting to know each member of my class, their family histories, interests, strengths, preferred means of communicating, and hopes and dreams for the future, nurtures cross-cultural understanding, which makes learning more accessible to all. I also learn that it is equally important for my students to know who I am, where I’ve come from, my interests, and culture, so they grow more receptive of me, the foreigner in charge. Learning about the cultural make-up of all members is part of communicating effectively across cultures. Understanding communication involves understanding culture. In other words, learning how to communicate with my students requires learning about their cultures and the way culture
influences how one communicates with others. Storti (1994) claims that communication reflects the cultural norms constructed throughout one’s life - it is linked to culture and background as much as to personal characteristics.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teachers assume that when knowledge and skills are built around the communication styles of students and within frames of reference and lived experiences, learning becomes more relevant, meaningful, engaging, and accessible, resulting in higher levels of academic achievement (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2002). Fundamental to a proactive approach to teaching is acknowledging the role that culture plays in learning and meaning making. Teachers use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance and communication styles of students to make learning more effective and enjoyable (Gay, 2002).

**Culture**

One cannot become a culturally responsive teacher without first interpreting the complex construct that is culture. Defining “culture” is no easy task as it is fluid in nature, always evolving and can sometimes be difficult to even notice. Research (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2004; Hall, 1976; Ulijn & St. Amant, 2000) on culture has included an iceberg analogy to convey the idea that what we see as visible representations of culture are only a small portion, approximately 10%, of the entire construct. The culture that is not visible is more engrained into society, difficult to identify, embedded more internally, and represented in values and ideologies. The surface culture is what we see when examining others from the outside in, and this view contains artifacts, behaviours, language, and customs of a group.
Human beings are all deeply guided by culture and contexts, which inevitably impacts how teachers engage in their work. Learning to see with a “cultural eye” (Milner, 2010) is part of being culturally responsive. It involves seeing what is actually hidden or embedded so deeply into lived experiences that individuals are not explicitly aware of it. It is natural, and perhaps less ambiguous, to associate culture with what is visible to us; the kind of visual elements that are easily identifiable, accessible, and shared, like clothing, food, and music; however, cultural responsiveness requires the teacher to delve deeper into what is hidden beneath the surface to enhance her or his understanding of student knowledge and lived experiences as they apply to curriculum and instruction (Wisniewski, Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2012). It is this hidden level that informs the behaviours and artifacts that are visible. Teachers can access this level by seeking the perspectives of their students through careful questioning (Delgado-Gaitan, 2006) and making an effort to discover what students see, feel, think, and hear.

Acquiring explicit knowledge about the cultural diversity of students is another component of culturally responsive education, as it can lead to more effective delivery of the curriculum (Gay, 2000, 2002). Mere interest and openness to multicultural education is not enough (e.g., thematic unit recognizing the contributions of a particular culture or race). Being a culturally responsive teacher means seeking out information and making an effort to acquire detailed, factual information on characteristics, values, contributions, communication and learning styles, and relational patterns that will aid in motivating student interest.

**Cultural Discontinuity**

Navigating my way through the first two weeks in a new school (in a foreign country) feels more like getting lost than finding my way. The stress, marked by the burning in my chest,
grows each time I notice that my teaching strategies are not working like they should. What has worked in the past, at a different time and in another place (Canada), apparently does not work with my students in Mongolia. There is a noticeable barrier between my students and me, and this barrier can be attributed to what Ramsey (1998, as cited in Deveney, 2007) describes as cultural discontinuity.

Cultural discontinuity occurs as a result of encountering another culture and finding that the cultural differences have a considerable impact on the quality of interactions between the self and those from the other culture (Ramsey, 1998, as cited in Deveney, 2007). Furthermore, students and teachers can experience a great deal of stress when instructional approaches lack efficiency and effective communicative quality.

When faced with a class largely consisting of a culture unlike their own, teachers have the choice between two approaches. According to Le Roux (2001), teachers can carry on with instruction and planning like they have done in previous school years, or they can endure an unsettling period when they reevaluate the educational setting and consider substantial changes. Carrying on without reconsidering a change might result in poor performance and lack of motivation displayed by students. When children bring to school worldviews and lived experiences that differ from what is considered “normal” in the learning environment, they become apathetic, confused, and potentially antagonistic (Wood, 1998). What can result is a perceived assumption by the teacher that this sort of behaviour reflects poor or limited academic capability, leading to unwarranted lowering of expectations. Since teacher expectations have an impact on student achievement (Cushner et al., 1992; Gay, 2000), it is imperative that teachers
hold realistic expectations and understand the differing needs of their students so success is possible for all members of the learning community.

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What measures could you take before the start of the school year to learn more about the cultural make-up of your students?

How will you represent your cultural make-up to your new class? How will you communicate beyond one common language?

When faced with a cultural context where your teaching strategies no longer prove successful, how might you navigate your way through a significant period of discomfort, uncertainty, and ambiguity until things begin to fall into place?
CHAPTER 3: CANADIAN FLAG
“I don’t think that’s right. That’s definitely not right.”

“Okay, let’s read the problem again,” I say to Naran who is at my desk requesting help but has stopped to pick up the Canadian flag that she has accidentally brushed off the side of my desk. Two more children join her at my desk. “We both can’t understand this, Miss Bond. Can you help us?”

I look past my three students at the clock on the wall and see that our Math period is drawing to an end. We work through their difficulties together until all three children feel confident enough to return to their desks and work independently. As I rise from my desk to address the class, I see that my Canadian flag has fallen again. Feeling rushed, I pluck it from the floor and set it on the top of my desk to deal with later.

“What do you think you will need to do for homework?” I ask the group. The children, many in unison, list the predictable pages in the textbook and I copy them onto the whiteboard.

“That’s right. And what should I see you doing right now?” I prompt.

Bataar raises his hand and responds, “We write in homework journal, Miss Bond.”

“Why?” I ask.

More children raise their hands. “Tseren?”

“So when we do our homework, we can look and see the pages and know what to do. We forget the pages and you’ll be mad at us, Miss Bond.” Heads bow to journals as the children scribble down the assigned homework.

For a moment, my exhaustion feels worth all the hard work required of me during this first month of school, and, aside from a few behavioural lapses, the class seems to be making progress. But then stress tightens my chest when I glance at the clock and see that I have only
five minutes to rush through the classroom, ensuring that all of the children have successfully copied down the homework.

“Looks good, Tommy.”

“That’s fine, Ariuna.”

“You two can push in your chairs and line up for break.”

I see a student leave his desk and sneak towards the door. I catch him with my words, “Tsetseg, have you shown me your homework journal?” I call out. “You know I need to see it before you leave for break.” Bayar is at the door and pulls him back into the room by his collar. I cringe. Tseteg, unaffected by the physical force, smirks and retreats to his desk while his friends laugh at him for getting caught.

I check the time again. Two minutes until breaktime.

I scan the room and see there are many still waiting for permission to leave so I weave through desks as quickly as I can. What I’d prefer to do is just dismiss them all and call it a day ... call it another exhausting day ...

Needing help, I look for Bayar, who is at Enkhbat’s desk, scanning his journal. He takes Enkhbat’s pencil, flips it around, and lowers the eraser side to the page, prompting Enkhbat to correct his mistakes. I want to correct Bayar’s mistake.

The clock shows that we have one minute until breaktime. Almost done.

Bayar has moved on and is fooling around with Altan again. He taps him on the back as he asks to see his journal and then jokingly squeezes him where his neck meets his shoulder. Altan winces and contracts away before retaliating with a jab to Bayar’s torso. Bayar is not helping.
BRRRRRING.

I feel a pang of guilt at the sound of the break bell. We are not ready. Five more journals to check, and we still have to make sure that the children are lined up and behaving before walking them to the playground for their break.

As I rush to check more journals, I notice Bayar at my desk trying to reattach the flag to my desk. I stop what I am doing and ask him to help in the hallway by making sure the children are lined up.

“That’s great,” I say to Enkhbat.

“Don’t forget the page numbers, Sanaa.”

“Miss Bond, can I go?”

“Okay, you can go line up.”

“Don’t forget to push in your chair.”

As the final two children head towards the door, I am able to pause and catch my breath, I am grateful for the quiet moment alone but it is interrupted by a commotion in the hallway. Bae and Altan are playfighting, while Tseren is shrieking at them to stop. I purse my lips and lunge into the hallway planning to reprimand the delinquents, but, before I manage to diffuse the raucous behaviour, an arm reaches across my path. I watch as Bayar grabs the back of Altan’s neck and pulls him back towards the line. “STOP THAT,” he barks and snaps, “Get in line,” as he lightly kicks Bae’s behind forcing him forward towards the group.

It happens in a flash. I am left frozen. Voiceless. Motionless.

The class is still rowdy but lined up in a row. Bayar walks from the back to the front of the line and calms the noise. “Hoi!” he yells, signaling for compliance. Silence.
In my place, I watch as they march down the hall and out the doors.

*****

The vignette begins as a simple telling of a familiar time for many teachers. It is the orientation month of a new school year, 10 minutes before the morning break period. The children are writing down the homework instructions and preparing to go outside for their breaktime. The telling of this familiar time of day begins to show more observable difficulty when I describe how the lack of time to check homework journals along with my exhaustion causes me to feel stressed and frustrated. It is compounded by my teaching assistant, Bayar, and how I perceive him as unhelpful until, at the end of the vignette, conflict peaks when Bayar’s actions towards Altan and Bae leave me speechless.

There is an increasing sense of panic and frustration as the vignette progresses, which shows when I repeatedly mention exhaustion, lack of time, and need for extra help. Pace slows each time that I check the time, emphasizing its importance and reflecting a teacher who feels under the control of a schedule. The pace speeds up near the end of the vignette as I build up the moment when Bayar uses physical discipline to manage behaviour, and I am taken aback by his actions.

My reactions to Bayar’s actions in the classroom indicate a teaching team that is not a team at all, but rather uncoordinated with incompatible approaches to teaching. I describe using my words to “catch” Tsetseg, whereas Bayar literally catches him with physical force, drawing him back into the classroom. I view Bayar’s method for correcting Enkhbat’s mistakes a mistake
in itself. My response is influenced by my Western teacher education that emphasizes student ownership over errors and allowing children to correct their work independently.

There are many issues that can be drawn out of this narrative of difficulty and consequently examined in more depth. Understanding socio-political context, ethnocentrism, and the role of privilege in decreasing ethnocentrism are themes that are buried within the actions, attitudes, symbolism, and subtext that make up this retelling of an uncomfortable event in my teaching history.

**Understanding Socio-Political Context**

Researchers (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2000) in the field of multicultural education suggest teachers develop a culturally diverse knowledge base as part of becoming more culturally responsive in their practice. This responsivity involves understanding cultural characteristics, reflecting on one’s own attitudes and practices, and knowing cultural values, traditions, communication and learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns. Gaining knowledge of the socio-political histories and context of the class, and adapting pedagogy and curriculum accordingly, creates a more harmonious, relevant, and meaningful learning experience for students (Ladson-Billings, 2001). This is a useful pedagogical approach for teaching students; however, in analyzing the relationship between myself and Bayar, I can see how it might have potential utility for international school teachers working with host national teaching assistants or co-teachers; an area of research and practice that is largely neglected.

As I unpack this event, I consider Bayar’s perspective, his life history, and the social history surrounding his socialization as a means for analyzing his actions. He has grown up in Soviet-era Mongolia when the education system was under the control of a Communist regime.
Bayar was socialized in an education system characterized as strict and teacher-directed, one that enlisted corporal punishment as a classroom management strategy. It was not uncommon for Western teachers at my international school to be given permission from parents to use physical discipline on their children to manage and correct behaviours. The Soviet-style education system was strongly centralized with a hierarchal top-down approach to leadership and reform. The highly specialized curricula were designed to prepare students for jobs in a command economy (Weidman & Yoder, 2010). I come to the realization that Bayar’s knowledge of teaching would have been highly influenced by his own teachers and his experience as a student exposed to Soviet-style schooling. In this respect, his actions in my classroom were those of a teacher, a Soviet-style teacher. I perceived his actions as unhelpful, but he did try to help in ways he viewed acceptable.

I return to the beginning of the vignette, to the voice of Tseren describing the importance of homework journals. Doing what is told ‘so teacher will not get mad’ is the kind of attitude that goes against my personal teaching philosophy and all that I have been taught at my Western-liberal university about encouraging students to be intrinsically motivated learners. This notion of doing something so as to avoid punishment, however, can be attributed to the climate of the old Soviet-era classroom. It is possible that Tseren’s parents, who grew up during this era, have influenced her views on school and expectations of her teachers. Parental influence could also account for Tsetseg being “unaffected” by Bayar pulling back on his collar. He was not bothered because it was an action to be expected of the authoritarian teacher.
Ethnocentrism

When I unpack this vignette, I am startled by what I find. Turning my attention inward, I see my actions in a new light and discover that my judgment and self-centredness played a significant role in the conflict and incompatibility that inhabited our classroom. It is not uncommon for those immersed in cross-cultural exchanges to experience ethnocentrism at some point. Ethnocentrism is present when people use standards from their own cultural background to judge and to make conclusions about people from other cultures (Brislin, 1990). Through my reexamination of the text, I realize that I am ethnocentric when I question Bayar’s helpfulness because he is not adhering to my standards of professionalism when, in fact, it is a matter of differing socio-cultural perceptions on professionalism and the role of the teacher.

Thomas (1996) suggests that identifying home culture privileges can decrease ethnocentric attitudes, behaviours, and expectations.

Those who are privileged, simply due to race or ethnicity, are so ingrained in their culture that they are incapable of perceiving their privilege. They then use their own cultural context as a standard against which others should be judged and to which others should aspire. (Thomas, 1996, p. 218)

This is helpful information for those teachers who choose to move abroad to teach at international schools and will inevitably experience some degree of ethnocentrism as part of their cross-cultural experience. Confronting one’s own privilege should be a part of the transitional process of acculturating to another country’s culture. Thomas (1996) also suggests studying the new culture and the “others” who are a part of it, to develop expectations that fit within the new
cultural context, and to evaluate the “other” from the worldview of the new culture, not the home culture.

I planted a part of myself, who I was – my identity – in the classroom. The Canadian flag hung from my desk proudly marking my nationality for all to see. *This is me everyone. I’m Canadian. That’s what you can expect when you come into my classroom.* But the flag did not stick. It kept falling from my desk and, even though it was returned to its place, it continued to fall like it did not belong. I look at my own attitudes and actions in this vignette and see them as aspects of my self that did not ‘stick’ or belong in the cultural context of my classroom. Stepping away from my own cultural bubble and giving time and attention to the socio-political context could have allowed for a more harmonious working relationship with the other teacher in the classroom, Bayar, who, in his own way, was effective with our students.

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Who will be a part of your teaching team? How will you better understand the socio-political context of the people with whom you will be working? What measures can you take to ensure compatibility with your teaching partner?

What are some of your own cultural biases? Why do you think you hold on to these biases? How might you be able to address them, both proactively and in an on-going manner?

How much do you know about the views on education and the expectations of teachers in the culture into which you will become immersed?
CHAPTER 4: MONGOLIAN BOOTS
It is a bright and cool September Sunday morning, during my second year in Mongolia. The large SUV is full of people when Nyamsuren and his father pick me up at my guarded apartment complex. A twinge of rattled nerves courses through my chest and I remind myself that I will not regret accepting their invitation, even though I will be surrounded by people I don’t know and will not be able to communicate very well with anyone who does not speak English. It was a decision resulting from a battle in my head in which the intrepid voice won, beckoning me to join her at the end of my comfort zone.

“Sain baina uu,” I say to everyone as I climb in and squish myself into a spot, observing that I would have neither a proper seat nor a seatbelt on this journey to the countryside. We are so tightly compacted that I swear I can feel the heartbeat of the woman behind me. But I am not fazed. I grab hold of the seat in front of me and brace myself for the bumpy ride.

We make our way out of the city on run down streets, passing gangs of feral dogs, broken-down Soviet blocks, and one ger district after another. Eventually we come to the end of the paved road and veer into the vast countryside.

... 

I step over the threshold and into the circular home where steaming, salty milk tea is simmering on the wood stove. I am careful to accept whatever is passed to me in a proper manner: right hand outstretched with left hand under right elbow. I do not want to offend my student’s family for they are gracious to invite me to such a special event in their annual calendar: the ceremonial branding of the foals.

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3 “hello” in the English language
4 nomadic home with a rounded lattice frame covered in felt, also known as a yurt
5 slums or shantytowns in the poorest area of the city
Nyamsuren guides me to where the foals will be branded and describes the process as we watch his father burn the family’s mark into the foals’ hind legs. I cringe.

... "Watch this, Miss Bond!"

The arag⁶ tickles my nose as I swallow another sour sip and watch as Nyamsuren and his father showcase the Mongolian national sport of wrestling, bending over and tugging at each other’s belts. It is a solid attempt by the eight-year-old but it is his father who secures the victory just before all 20 or so of us gather together in one ger for our main meal: boiled goat.

I learn from Nyamsuren that all parts of the animal are treasured and made useful, if not for the body then they would be used for the home; bones kept as household tools and vertebrae adopted as players’ pieces for a traditional game.

Nyamsuren serves me a plate of meat along with some unidentifiable parts. He translates as his grandmother lists the contents on my plate: stomach, intestine, blood sausage, liver, kidneys ... While not exactly watering at the mouth, I am reassured that there will be more meal to come.

As a well-mannered Canadian I feel obliged to finish what is on my plate, and the mental coaching begins ...

I have to put that in my mouth?

Yes!

You must be polite and eat what is given to you.

What if I say I’m a vegetarian?

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⁶ fermented mare’s milk
If you tell them that you don’t eat meat you will offend them even more than if you excused yourself to go and gallop away on a foal.

What if I gag? I could be sick.

It might not be so bad if you just keep chewing.

Imagine it’s something tasty or just direct your thoughts elsewhere, and just keep chewing!

As soon as I clear my plate, it is filled again with more goat parts, and this time I don’t bother inquiring about the names. It is mind over matter once again as I attempt to politely chew on what I believe to be a part of the goat’s stomach. I gnaw and gnaw but it does not seem to break down in my mouth. I wonder how one maintains respectable table manners in the presence of one’s host when it is nearly impossible to bite through one’s food? My jaw begins to ache, and I divert my attention to the others in the room.

There are exchanges of plates and slices of meat, and one man is reaching far across the ger to pour vodka into cups. Amongst the flying bones and sprinkles of grease are smiling faces and generous offerings. They are together, sharing food, celebrating new life, and as I continue to chew I realize that I, too, am a part of their togetherness. Nobody around me seems to worry about the grease on his or her fingers or adhering to any mealtime protocol. They are just giving and receiving food to honour this day and to honour each other – people connected through blood, friendship, or spiritual attachment, all gathered in this one small felt-covered structure, sharing one goat (one whole goat), and they have invited me, an outsider to be a part of all of this activity that is treasured in their culture. I assume that I must look and seem so foreign to
them all yet they continue to go out of their way to make me feel welcome. They honour me with every offering and thank me for coming to their country to teach Nyamsuren.

I lower my plate to my lap ... with head down, I look at what is left in my hands ... still chewing on that same piece of stomach, I do not entertain the idea of giving up and spitting it out but instead find myself smiling. I am disgustingly happy.

After all the food is eaten, I am invited to dress in traditional Mongolian clothing. A burly and rosy-cheeked old man wraps a deel\textsuperscript{7} around my shoulders. I slide my arms into the sleeves as another member of the family swiftly ties a sash around my waist. “Za\textsuperscript{8},” she says as she stands back to look at me.

Nyamsuren slips through his elders and appears with a pair of decorative boots; large, colourful, and curled up at the toe.

“Wear these, Miss Bond! Then you’ll really look Mongolian,” he proclaims.

Struggling to maintain my balance, I carefully step into the boots, stand up, and look once again at the faces of the others who have made me one of their own.

*****

This narrative describes a pivotal event in my journey, an event that significantly influenced my evolving identity as an international teacher and cultural navigator. It is a story saturated with discomfort, but as events unfold and I navigate my way through the moments of difficulty, that discomfort turns into something else: happiness.

\textsuperscript{7} a long robe, pronounced “del”
\textsuperscript{8} “okay” in Mongolian language
From the beginning of the narrative, I am already dealing with “rattled nerves” as I wait to join my student, Nyamsuren, and his family on a day trip into the heart of the Mongolian countryside for a special annual event. I am anxious about venturing into unfamiliar territory, not being able to communicate, and not being able to escape from my discomfort in the remote countryside. I am afraid of the unknown, and I am alone in my fears as I am the lone foreigner in a place where I do not belong.

I had a choice that day. I could have turned down the invitation and let my fear of the unknown take power over me, but instead I chose to listen to the voice inside beckoning me to step outside my comfort zone. This voice continues throughout the narrative as I continuously engage in an ongoing battle with my comfort levels while navigating unfamiliar territory. It is the voice that arises when one is faced with a dilemma, those particular moments when the implications of our decisions could have a profound effect on our future self. I chose to go forward and venture into the unknown, thus stepping outside my comfort zone.

It is evident from the ongoing negotiation between voices that choosing to step outside my comfort zone does not just happen in one step. It is a process of moving back and forth, finding comfort in the discomfort, and finding strength to venture forward even when fear continues to reside inside.

Squeezing myself into the vehicle packed full with people does not faze me. I have already faced this predicament during my first year in Mongolia. I have negotiated with my fears and found a place where I can comfortably join the pack and not worry about buckling up for safety. But the voice awakens when I am served goat, including organs that I have never before been expected to eat. I wrestle with the voices in my head and find strength within myself to
ignore my resistance and try something new, as disgusting as it appears in that moment. So I chew, and while chewing and chewing (and chewing), I begin to feel the change, a transformation. It is a moment when I find myself immersed in a culture so very different from the one I was born into, experiencing what would terrify most people (and my past self) but feeling grateful and honoured to be a part of the whole greasy mess that was the chaos of a festive Mongolian mealtime. I am disgustingly happy.

I lower my plate to my lap and take in what is happening all around me. I am disconnected from the moment, and time seems to slow down as I divert my attention to the others around me. I become changed as I compare who I am and what I believe in that moment in time to my self in the past. The events leading up to that realization have contributed to this new way of knowing about another culture, and about life. As I see the Mongolians eating, I am enlightened by the way they eat the entire animal and find use for each part. I am shocked that I am eating stomach and other organs, and watch in amazement as everyone around me enjoys it all, even the eyeballs. This attitude contrasts my own culture where “good cuts of meat” are sought after while the rest are thrown away. I begin to compare my past and present place and past and present self, viewing my own culture as wasteful in comparison to the Mongolians who waste nothing.

Cross-cultural Respect for the Other/Another/An-other

Honour and respect can be drawn out from this narrative. I honour my hosts by carefully receiving offerings with the proper custom. They honour their goat by eating all the meat, organs, and finding use for the bones. They also honour me because of my status as Nyamsuren’s teacher, but my status is compromised by a sense of vulnerability throughout the day as I am
introduced to a culture of which I am unfamiliar. I am the minority, the outsider, the “Other” (Galani-Moutafi, 1999; Sampson, 1993).

**Role taking**

Stepping into the unfamiliar and interacting with those who are viewed as different from the self (e.g. Other) can initiate self-discovery and contribute to the formation and/or transformation of one’s identity (Charon, 1992; Galani-Moutafi, 1999; Weis, 1995). Charon (1992) maintains that “it is through others that we come to see and define self, and it is our ability to role take that allows us to see ourselves through others” (p. 107). This notion of “role taking” can be seen in my willingness to participate in the events of the day, allowing my student to show me his cultural customs, and as Charon (1995) describes, “imagining the world from the perspective of another” (p. 104). By imagining this world and by participating in it, one becomes better equipped to manage and navigate the situations that arise. Role taking, or allowing the self to step into the shoes of an-Other, can enable more enriched interaction with those viewed as “different.”

**Journeying and Identity Re/Formation**

Galani-Moutafi (1999) claims that self-discovery and self-representation result from ‘gazing’ into the elsewhere and the Other. I undergo a process of self-(re)discovery while interacting with Nyamsuren and his family and while navigating through the unfamiliar (e.g. dangerous drive, food, drink, language, and etiquette). I can pinpoint the moment when I undergo a shift in my identity. Time slows while I negotiate my way through mealtime, and instead of becoming repulsed, I smile. It is a moment of “becoming.”
Social interactions and relations directly impact our social identity (Houtum & Lagendijk, 2001; Houtum & Naerseen, 2002), which is always undergoing a process of ‘re-writing’ the self. Migrating transnationally can dramatically alter one’s identity as one physically moves and personal and social boundaries shift (Gardner, 1995; Houtum & Naerseen, 2002). As one journeys from one place to another geographically and metaphorically, an inward voyage occurs, a process of introspection and what Clifford (1998) describes as a “coming to consciousness.” There is a resetting of boundaries, both personal and cultural, as the travelling self embarks on additional journeying practice between the familiar and unfamiliar, between here, there, and elsewhere (Galani-Moutafi, 1999). As one discovers more about the Other, one is simultaneously re/discovering the Self. This self-consciousness can be attained by engaging in self-reflexive practice.

**Reflexive practice**

Migrating from one place to another in a geographic sense does not guarantee a deeper renegotiation with the Self, but if one is able to move to another place, an-other’s place (and in their shoes) a re/formation of the identity can result. Galani-Moutafi (1999) suggests reflexivity as a tool for journeying to this new “place.” The self-analysis that reflexivity enables can provide insights while moving in and out of various contexts and engaging with Others.

Reflexivity requires a rigorous examination of the self (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) and, as Pillow (2003) suggests, examination of the Other, which involves giving voice and allowing for representation. It also involves truth gathering and paying close attention to the accuracy of information. Lastly, reflexivity involves transcending one’s own subjectivity and cultural context to avoid misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Discomfort can accompany
this process as it requires a great deal of self-awareness and effort to minimize predispositions, but discomfort should be acknowledged as a sign of progress. Without it, one cannot move forward in one’s way of knowing and arrive at a new place of being.

**Student as Teacher**

My identity as a teacher begins to shift as I am taken on a journey led by my student. The question arises: who is teaching whom? Kooy and de Freitas (2007) explore diasporic (dis)location as it disrupts and recreates teacher identity. They describe how teacher identity can shift as a result of nomadic movements across borders, both national and metaphorical. My own teacher identity evolves as I shift from teacher to student. I cross a personal border and enter a place where I begin to shift from one way of knowing to another. My own cultural framework begins to re/form with each new experience I encounter.

I describe my emotion of feeling “disgustingly happy” while eating goat. I am unsettled by the thought of eating unidentifiable parts of an animal yet exhilarated as it challenges my own life history and self-concept. In this liminal space where I struggle to make new sense of who I am, my identity begins to shift from the all-knowing Western teacher to one who is humbled by the Other/another/an-other. It is this experience that encapsulates my understanding of myself as an “international teacher.” I learn to allow myself to be vulnerable to experiences outside my comfort zone so that I can join my students at their level and within their own cultural framework. This vulnerability is what allows me to connect with my students and be a more effective, culturally responsive teacher. Teaching was in the hands of Nyamsuren that day, a boy whose name translates as “Sunday power,” and I, the student, learned to step outside of my comfort zone and into the shoes of an-other.
How comfortable are you with stepping outside your comfort zone?

What barriers stand in the way of you being able to obtain another’s worldview or perspective?

What kind of reflexive practices could you adopt that would enlighten and enhance your cross-cultural experiences?
CHAPTER 5: TUGRIKS
After an hour in deadlocked traffic, we are relieved to reach our destination – the large department store in the city centre that is the go-to for most household items. Kate passes me a few thousand tugriks as I direct our taxi driver to pull over and stop. “Een, Zoxaray!”

Even though I know the approximate cost of the trip, I ask the driver to tell me how much money he wants. I detect a slight smirk when he requests three times the amount of what a local should pay for the trip. I laugh while protesting in Mongolian, “No, no, we are not tourists. Six thousand tugriks is okay.” Before he can contest, we are already out of the car and on our way into the store, shaking our heads in frustration at this repetitive occurrence.

We are on our way to a friend’s birthday dinner at a restaurant further down the road but stop in at the store to buy one of the elaborately decorated Mongolian birthday cakes that mark most special celebrations.

We carefully select the most decadent looking cake behind the display glass. The caramel chocolate topping is a rare find among the plethora of fruit and glaze-covered cakes. Kate and I look at each other excitedly, like two little girls who have just found a treasure, knowing that a cake this special will most certainly impress our friends.

The shop assistant packages the cake in a protective cardboard box, ties string strategically around the box for easy portability, and passes it over with a smile.

We exit the building and feel the piercing force of the extreme dry cold of winter. As we raise our hoods to protect us from impending frostbite, we hear shouting from across the street. It is in English. We know it is directed at us.

We do what we always do when we hear this familiar contemptuous tone. We ignore their goading and carry on down the street towards the restaurant, adding a bit more speed to our steps.

We come upon a usual sight - a street kid begging for money. But tonight, this kid is not alone. Five children of various sizes\(^9\) swarm Kate and me, pleading for “money, money, money, money.” I am certain that this is the only English word I ever hear from street kids. It is probably the only one they know (or need to know).

A fence on one side and zooming traffic on the other creates a trap, and we are left without an escape route. The relentless gang pushes up against us, some with their hands out and others reaching for our pockets. A couple of the boys proceed to latch onto our arms. The more we resist, the more aggressive they get.

I’ve seen this. I’ve been in this predicament before. I remember the time, when nearly at my apartment complex, I had to forcefully thrust my elbow at a boy who became violent with me when I had nothing to give him. The presence of the security guard kept the incident from getting worse. But this time we are alone and there is no one around to help. In my mind, I become more conscious of my predicament and begin to anticipate how this incident might unravel ...

Do you really think that you can

defend yourself against these kids?

I might have to fight back.

But these kids could be the same

age as your students.

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\(^9\) age is indistinguishable due to the effects of poor hygiene and nutrition on the growth and development of homeless children and youth
But these kids are not my students. They are not kids. Their lives have aged them. They won’t leave. They’re not going to take ‘no’ for an answer. You better prepare yourself. Are you going to retaliate?

How can I? They are children.

Helpless children. Maybe I should try to give them something.

If you do that, you will invite trouble. You’ve seen this before. They won’t be happy with what you give them. They will continue to plead for more.

What should I do?

*When the gang realizes that we are not going to give them what they want, the tallest boy knocks the cake out of Kate’s hands and we all watch as it hits the ground. Just as Kate picks up the box, the boy snatches it from her hands and, with the others at his side, runs off with our special treasure.*

*We are frozen in disbelief as we watch them run away. Kate and I look at each other and burst into nervous laughter. “Did that just ha…?” I am interrupted by an icy force that stings my left cheek. There is laughter in the distance, and I turn to see that one of the kids has returned. “Have a nice day!” he calls out.*
I no longer feel the -40°C temperature. Angry heat pulses throughout my body as I dig the snow out of my collar. Without hesitation, profanities storm out of my mouth, and I watch as the boy runs off to join his friends who are all laughing at my misfortune.

I wipe water from my eyes, unsure if it is melting snow or tears running down my face. My heart races as a boiling from within rises up towards my face. I am still yelling. Not at anyone in particular. Just yelling. Long-suppressed frustration and anger have been stirred up and are now exploding like hot lava out of my body – from my mouth, my eyes, my actions.

I tear down the street, with arms striking at the sky, and words flying. I feel suffocated by my fury and struggle to catch my breath. I slow my steps, and my breathing follows. I inhale, and my defenses begin to retreat. I exhale, and I feel my face and shoulders relax. My body reacts as new thoughts formulate. I concentrate on cooling down, yet my mind continues full steam, arriving at a new place inhabited by empathy and guilt.

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This is a story that has played out in my mind, stayed with me, and buried itself deep into my being, as it signifies a time in my life when I came into a new way of knowing and viewing myself in this world. Much growth can come out of emotional, soul-drilling experiences, and it is clear from the way that I describe my own personal affective eruption in this vignette, and consequent arrival at a new place, that growth does occur.

I can see myself as wavering between two places throughout this vignette. I show that I have become accustomed to life in Ulaanbaatar and have a clearer idea of what to expect from
my environment. I know the cost of the taxi ride and have learned how to respond to taxi drivers who try to overcharge foreigners. I am not surprised to hear someone calling at me or to see street kids begging for money. I have learned the language and adopted some key phrases so as to avoid misconceptions (e.g. “No, no, we are not tourists”). I see myself as bordering between two places: one that requires adaptability and assertive behaviour (my present self), and another that obeys taxi drivers’ requests and has only ever had peaceful encounters with children (my past self).

An inner battle ensues when faced with my relentless young aggressors. It is a battle between my past self and present self, held deep within my subconscious and represented by two voices. Attention is given to this dialogue, a mental conversation that, in reality, happened in mere seconds. The time and attention on this inner battle suggests its importance in the reshaping of my identity.

Feelings of frustration and loss of control run throughout this vignette, from the beginning when the attempt to overcharge is acknowledged as a repetitive occurrence to being called (once again) a “rich girl” to feeling victimized by aggressive street kids. The temperature changes from cold to hot as long suppressed frustration and anger arise from deep within myself only to erupt and explode into the space all around me. It is clear that the events that unfold in this vignette are not isolated incidents but ones with which I deal on a regular basis. This is the moment when I reach ‘breaking point’ and I can no longer tolerate feeling oppressed or victimized.

As the vignette draws to an end, I find myself in a new place inhabited by empathy and guilt. Very quickly, I move from feeling suffocated by my fury to feeling calmed and humbled. It
is a moment of change as my mind continues “full steam” until I find that I am overcome with one set of emotions rather than another. What brings about this change? What are the thoughts that charge through my mind and have such an impact on my body and emotional condition?

**Racism and Empathy**

It hit me like a smack in the face: *I now know what it feels like to be a victim of racism*, I thought. I grew up without ever truly knowing what it feels like from the perspective of a targeted victim. Now I do. Racism is an ideology that underlies acts of prejudice and discrimination (Vaughn, 2010). Prejudice is a negative and usually unjustified judgment of another person based on the cultural group with which the person is associated. It involves overgeneralizations and reflects views grounded in racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism (among others), leading to acts of discrimination.

In that moment, when I erupt with anger, I feel racialized. After months experiencing discrimination, I feel the helplessness and fear of what it is like to be a disliked minority, in a country where I am viewed as a White “rich girl,” which makes me react unfavourably to many who have negative predispositions towards White Westerners. I start to develop empathy for minoritized groups who have had a long history battling racism. Now the tables have turned and I am the minority: targeted, hated, and battered. Empathy grew out of my misfortune but, as my thoughts continue “full steam,” my empathy quickly turns to feelings of guilt.

**White Privilege and Guilt**

I come to see myself in a different light, in relation to others in this place that does not belong to me. I realize that I have been ignorant all along. I failed to acknowledge my privilege and, in retrospect, I see that I was oblivious to it. I am “White,” a Westerner, and, although I do
not consider myself wealthy whatsoever, I am a “rich girl” in the developing country of Mongolia. McIntosh (1988) defines privilege as an “invisible, weightless knapsack of unearned assets, special provisions that can be cashed in with or without the knowledge or consent of the beholder” (p. 1). The path to understanding privilege requires one to take a journey of self-awareness and critical reflection, a journey requiring an “unpacking” of the invisible knapsack, or frame of reference, around privilege (Middleton, Anderson, & Banning, 2009).

Examining one’s frame of reference around privilege can be an arduous and discomforting journey, often bringing out feelings of cognitive dissonance resulting from a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2000) or “life maker” (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2005) that has prompted a response. I look at my own response to the dilemma I faced on the street that cold winter’s night. I thought, How could someone view me this way? I am here to teach children and bring good to their country? Then I shift my cognitive understanding of privilege and how I fit into that new concept, and suddenly the invisible backpack becomes a little clearer.

Middleton, Anderson, and Banning (2009) present ways that one can move forward in the journey towards understanding one’s own privilege. One critical component is to make the conscious effort to seek resolution when faced with a disorienting dilemma that causes discordance. Recognize that the discomfort that is experienced is an essential part of the cyclical process of knowing, unknowing, learning, and unlearning. My shift in knowing/unknowing was instigated by the disorienting dilemma described in this vignette, but it was not until I participated in an activity called “Power Shuffle”\(^\text{10}\) (McIntosh, 1988), or “Line of Privilege” that

\(^{10}\) See Appendix A for a Power Shuffle activity influenced by Peggy McIntosh (1988).
I truly began to acknowledge the power of my own privilege. The activity involves responding to a series of statements by moving forward or backward. The statements relate to level of education, race, sexual orientation, gender, family history, and social class. Moving forward indicates more privilege and hence more power. It was an experience that changed how I viewed myself in this world and as an educator. I began questioning what I knew, how I had come to know what I knew, and what it meant to be White. Middleton, Anderson, and Banning (2009) describe this type of self-questioning as an essential part of critical reflection.

Developing respectful and sincere relationships with those who are oppressed and engaging in difficult dialogues and constructive conversations can help to develop a deeper level of awareness resulting in a higher level of understanding privilege, power, self, and other (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2005; Middleton, Anderson, & Banning, 2009).

In acknowledging my privilege, I am ashamed that I become so angry at the acts of discrimination towards me. I have begun to know what racism feels like, yet I know that I am still the privileged one in the end. It is true that I was racialized, but only in these incidents, in this context, among some people, and, in the end, I am not truly oppressed.

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Are you aware of your own privilege and what that means to you and your practice? I invite you to read the statements presented in The Power Shuffle to get a sense of where you stand (see Appendix A).

How might you go about engaging in a critical reflection of your own? What resources can you seek out to help you in your own journey towards understanding the power dynamics that might play out overseas and in your classroom?

What does it mean to engage in difficult dialogues and constructive conversation? Consider the ways in which you can immerse yourself in your new cultural environment and develop deeper relationships with those you identify as different.
CHAPTER 6: TIBETAN BUDDHIST PRAYER WHEELS
The energy of the classroom is high, but controlled. They know what to do. They’ve been waiting for this time all day. I know this because they have repeatedly asked for confirmation that we will really, absolutely, most definitely – yes, I promise! – be having our Community Circle time today.

“Miss Bond, it’s Community Circle today, right?” repeats over and over but I do not respond. There is no need. They know how it all works. They can read the schedule posted on the front board.

2:30: Community Circle

They are not really asking me to confirm if it is going to happen, but rather expressing their excitement for our ritual. The light in their eyes and spring in their steps confirm it.

No direction is needed. They can see the clock and look to me for the signal indicating it is okay to move to the other room. I smile and nod, giving my permission.

There is a controlled flurry of activity. Chairs move. Books stack and slide into desks. Pencils find homes in cases and cans. There are numerous exchanges, and yet, the classroom is remarkably quiet. Some offer to carry textbooks to the shelf, while others tidy desks, work in teams to clean the area around their grouped desks, and push in the chairs of others who have rushed to the other room and have forgotten to push in their own.

By the time I enter the adjoining room most are sitting on their pillows, and those who are not are finding a place to settle. I can see that an empty spot has been saved for me, and I move towards my place in the circle ...

Surrounding the circle is a patchwork of photographs posted on the display boards that are mounted on the walls. There are photos of Kwon in his hanbok, the traditional clothing of
South Korea, and one of Enkhbat, with his baby sister at his side, posing in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The busy streets and bright lights of Times Square in New York City form the background of Jo’s photo from when he lived in America. On a blanket next to the Tuul River, Bayar and his family are sharing their picnic of fruits, khuurshuur, and juice and have paused to smile for their photo. There are photos of families sharing food or vacationing together, photos of landscapes of the places that have held significance in the personal histories of our community, and photos of special traditions and celebrations that are observed by my students and their families. I survey the photos and the little pieces of paper that surround them. They read:

*America sounds like a nice place. I learned that it is very noisy and there’s lots of honking in New York City, just like in Ulaanbaatar.*

- Maral

*I want to eat kimbap like people do in Korea. It looks like sushi. I love sushi.*

- Akemi

*Enkhbat ate snails! I don’t think I could do that. But I know how to say hello in French now. Bonjour!*  

- Narangerel

... As I nestle into my spot in the circle, I look at the other wall, adorned with photos of the past year: scientific experiments, group activities, cleaning up the garbage along the Tuul River, performances, and our nature hikes up the Bogd Khan Mountain. Almost as strenuous as the hike up the mountain was the journey to get here, to this way of working and being together.

Our ritual begins. After attending to the issues that have come up over the past week, I direct my students’ attention to the large flower that has bloomed on our wall. We take a moment

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11 Meat-filled pastry
to read what is written on each laminated petal: Participate fully. Listen attentively. Show appreciation. Reflect on experience. Value cultures and ideas. ... We recall the beginning of the year when we started with only two petals, and eventually, as we progressed, added new petals and continued to work together to improve our selves and our community. “Do you remember what activities we did together to learn how to better show appreciation?” I ask. Now, with one week left of the school year, we have one last petal on which to focus: Celebrate achievements.

... 

I can feel positive energy overflowing from the bus as I wait outside for the last few children to board for our end-of-year class trip to the countryside.

We exit the school grounds and drive through our neighbourhood until we get to the road that aligns the river. We follow the river until the city lights dwindle, and, as we enter the dusty plains, I think of the months that are behind us now.

Lessons and laughter.

Questions and quarrels.

Breakdowns and breakthroughs.

At the front of the bus, I turn around to address my students and explain the agenda for the day, but I choose instead to pause for a moment and, with the children’s singing, giggles, and games as my soundscape, I watch the skyline of the city begin to disappear and shrink in the distance. “Look how far we’ve come,” I say to myself.

...

An hour later, the bus pulls up to the monastery, and we file out and stretch to wake our bodies. After a quick briefing, the children calm their eagerness as we quietly enter through the
gates. There is a comforting tranquility that welcomes us upon entering, and, without disrupting the serenity, my students proceed in a respectful manner through the sacred grounds.

As we move together, examining the detail of the painted doorframes and the beams that run across the temples’ ceilings, I can sense a low hum of energy emanating from all corners of the monastery. The children have moved ahead of me, some stopping to look up at the details of the majestic stupas, while others speak quietly to each other about the sculptures they favour.

Eventually, we come to a line of prayer wheels, made out of gilded bronze and embossed with Tibetan script. My students commence the ritual and walk alongside the cylindrical, golden barrels, spinning them until there is enough momentum for continuous movement. It takes some effort to get going, but, with persistence and determination, the wheels gather enough momentum to keep moving on their own. I join my students, and, together in a line, we walk and spin, and all that can be heard is the clinging of metal and the faint tap of palms against the wheels.

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“Look how far we’ve come,” I say, alluding to the progress we have made as a class. It is the end of the school year, and as my final days teaching in Mongolia draw to an end, I find myself pausing for reflection and observing my class, which has become an entity, observable in the way they are able to function as a collective – calm yet energized, and able to transition from one activity to another, together, and without direction.

The details of this vignette hold significance in my journey towards actualizing myself as an “international teacher.” I tell of a time in my day-to-day practice when I was compelled to
stop and, from a removed place, view the goings-on in the classroom. I am able to separate myself from the hubbub, slow down, and absorb the quality of exchanges, the energy of the room, and the way every member moves productively through the space in practical silence and with such coordination. It was a moment of realization that something special had been created.

Attention is given to the way the class functions together, as a community. I take my time describing the fluent transition from one activity to another, and the excitement around the much-anticipated “Community Circle.” It is clear from the light in their eyes and the spring in their steps that the Community Circle is a valued ritual, and the description of how they work together to prepare for the Community Circle reflects a group that has truly become a community that looks after each other (e. g., some offer to carry textbooks to the shelf) and the environment in which they work (e. g., others tidy desks, work in teams to clean the area around their grouped desks). A question arises: how did this community come to function in this manner? As the vignette unfolds, the artifacts and actions within the story help to explain how my class has become a community, a collective.

The vignette begins as a portrait of the community, from the manner in which the students transition to the artifacts on the walls surrounding the circle. The photos, posted for all to see, reflect a community that values each individual, his or her history, family, and traditions, and also honours the progress made as a collective (e. g., science experiments, hikes). The attention given to the blooming flower on the wall allows for more explanation of the way in which the students have grown to become a community of individuals, working together and helping each other succeed. The petals represent the values and attributes that have been the foci
in the Community Circle throughout the year, and can be considered the building blocks that form the foundation of the community.

The latter half of the vignette continues to build on the essence of the community as we journey to the monastery in the countryside. The monastery itself embodies many of the traits of our community: tranquil but with a constant buzz of energy. We move together and apart, as one large group and in clusters, always maintaining a sense of cohesiveness. Earlier, while on the bus, I reflect on the trials and tribulations that have accompanied our journey towards cohesiveness. I acknowledge the quarrels and breakdowns that have been a part of the evolution of the collective. We began as a collection of cultures, have overcome challenges, and have evolved into a collective, a group of individual entities motivated by common interests.

**From a Collection of Cultures to a Cultural Collective**

There were growing pains in the beginning. I struggled to understand my students, while they struggled to understand me. I imagined them thinking, *who is this foreigner woman in front of us?* It is true that we started off as strangers, but eventually the collection of individuals, with different life histories, cultures, and interests, transformed into a cultural collective. How did my students gain the momentum to move on their own, as individuals and in sync as a group?

Brown (2007) suggests that students in a multicultural classroom succeed when the community is built around a culture of caring. Cultural caring is built when students’ cultures and experiences are used to “expand their intellectual horizons” (p. 58). Evidence of this expansion can be found in the artifacts that decorate the walls of our classroom. The photos of our families, cultural traditions, and experiences, as well as the comments from my students, reflect a community that builds learning around our identities, our histories, and our values.
A strong collective is built around reciprocity, when students and teachers act as partners to improve the quality of student learning (Brown, 2007). This democratic approach is evident when the welfare of the group takes precedence over that of the individual. My students demonstrate these principles in the vignette by pushing in the chairs of others and caring for the environment in which they all work as a team. When we meet as a community, we all join together and sit in a circle, at the same level, including myself, and we are able to see the faces of each member. Everyone is equal.

Research (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004; Putney & Broughton, 2011) into the effective classroom collective has included a closer look at the efficacy of the group and the role of the teacher in nurturing collective efficacy. Similar to self-efficacy, a belief in one’s capabilities to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997), collective efficacy reveals how well group members relate to one another while working toward common goals (Putney & Broughton, 2011). Relating occurs when students take on the role of local leaders, “uniting the collective for a common cause of encouraging autonomy, respect, and academic accountability” (Putney & Broughton, 2011, p. 103). While students take responsibility for the common good of the collective, the teacher acts as classroom community organizer, who helps students develop the capabilities to “operate as a continuing potent force for bettering their lives and upholding their sense of self-worth and dignity” (Bandura, 1997, p. 501).

In a cultural collective, students are self-directing and motivated to achieve based on the shared notion that working together can alleviate many of their academic issues that are ultimately shared issues (Putney & Broughton, 2011). Furthermore, it is important that teachers, acting as classroom community organizers, enable student self-direction in a learning
environment where caring interpersonal relationships are established through academic and social activities, and in an environment that fosters positive affect while promoting high academic achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Essentially, the class should be harmonious and able to “run itself.”

Since Mongolia, I have questioned how my class was able to shift from a collection of cultures to a collective culture. Influenced by the Social Constructivist paradigm, I am led to believe that it was the collaborative nature of learning and shared making of meaning that created a culture within the classroom. The viability of this culture was reliant on the relationships that emerged. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) describe “the emergent collective” as one that allows individuals to focus on and even obsess about things they find personally compelling (honouring the individual) and where events are structured for genuine interaction around shared artifacts (honouring the relationships). Within this notion of the working collective, I can see the learning power and potential emanating from the synergistic relationships occurring on different levels: between individuals, between teacher and students, and through school and society.

**The Cultural Collective as a Complex System**

The collective emanates a sustained, controlled energy. The members of the collective are able to move and accomplish tasks together with ease and without much noise. They move together as a whole and in smaller groups, continually interacting and adapting to the dynamic. As I examine my class and continue to question how my collection of individuals became a cultural collective, I look a little deeper at the dynamics of the system. As a whole, we functioned in a manner that was unique and only possible when all members worked together.
Then, when I consider the parts of that whole, like when my students work in smaller groups, I view them as unique unto themselves yet still maintaining the underlying core values and goals of the whole. Within those smaller groups are individuals, each with a unique history, culture, and personality that contributes to the dynamics of groups in which the individual interacts. While in the process of making sense of my class, a cultural collective, in this manner, I have been introduced to complexity theory, which serves to synthesize much of the ideas that have preoccupied my thoughts.

With its origins in math and science disciplines, complexity theory is predominantly concerned with change, evolution, adaptation, self-organization, and emergence (Ahmadian & Tavokoki, 2011), which lends itself very well to the field of education. Complexity theory focuses on dynamic relationships and patterns among complex unities, which “can be (and usually are) simultaneously autonomous unities, collectives of autonomous unities, and subsystems within grander unities” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 90). The nested nature of complex systems can be found in my own class collective as we move together and observe the monastery as a whole and then break (naturally) into smaller groups (unities) to interact in other unique ways.

Complex systems are also adaptive, always constantly influencing and being influenced by their context, through exchange of matter, information, or both (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Learning and knowledge emerge in a “simultaneous and intertwining (or nested) manner at multiple levels, not only at the level of the individual” (http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/glossary/g_education.htm), so the classroom collective itself is viewed as a level of importance where the conditions of emergent learning are ensured by the teacher.
The first condition necessary for emergence is internal diversity (http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/glossary/g_conditionsfore.htm), which constitutes the various backgrounds, interests, knowledge, abilities, and personalities and allowing these individual characteristics to contribute to the richness of the curriculum. There is evidence of internal diversity in the vignette when I look at the patchwork of photographs posted on the display boards that represent the diverse population of individuals in the community.

Finding similarities in culture, language, history, expectations, and experiences also fosters complex learning systems in the classroom (http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/glossary/g_conditionsfore.htm). Finding “common ground” within the system enables individuals to grow and change but remain anchored in what is common to all. This condition for emergence, referred to as internal redundancy, can be found in the way my class responds to the artifacts belonging to their peers. On the pieces of paper posted on the wall, there is evidence that my students connect and relate to the experiences and lives of others (e.g., the noise of the city, kimbap and sushi, speaking French). They learn that we are all unique but also that we can find similarities, thus establishing our common ground.

Another condition for emergence is the decentralizing of control within the collective (http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/glossary/g_conditionsfore.htm). Teachers and students should participate together in socially constructed learning experiences, where students are allowed to provide input regarding the direction of their learning (Ahmadian & Tavokoki, 2011). The Community Circle is a representation of decentralization. I join my students on the carpet, at their level, and in a circle we are able to see each member well. There is no leader sitting on a chair, dictating, but, instead, a collective democracy exists where voices are heard,
and everyone has an opportunity to express her or his views on the efficiency of the group. Of course, it is necessary for the teacher to give direction to the collective and have an overarching objective for learning, but there is always the understanding that ideas are valued and curiosity is celebrated, making each member a cultivator of his or her own learning experiences.

The Tibetan prayer wheel is used in meditative practice to accumulate wisdom and merit. Buddhists work to attain this good karma by repeatedly spinning the wheel until it is able to move on its own. Throughout my three years teaching in Mongolia, there were bumps along the road, but out of the lessons, the quarrels, and the breakdowns grew wisdom. I liken my three years of teaching in Mongolia to the spinning of the prayer wheel. At first, it required a great deal of effort to get going, but, in time, – and while concentrating on the attributes that help build a cultural collective – a unique energy continued to grow until there was enough momentum to allow the entity to spin on its own.

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How might you establish a culture of caring in your practice? Consider the routines, mores, and language used from day-to-day by the members of your community.

As collective community organizer, how will you establish yourself in this role with your students? How will you maintain it?

In your “emergent collective,” how do you maintain some control of the learning, while simultaneously encouraging a system that is decentralized?
CHAPTER 7: SILVER CUP
The flat expansive plains are a welcome relief from the treacherous steppe to the north and the smog of Ulaanbaatar. The frenzied rush to pack and ready myself for my departure from Mongolia has left me anxious, but now, as my tour group, my visiting friend Sam, and I travel through the Gobi Desert, a sense of peace falls over me. The hum of the Russian minivan and the serene falling sun calm me as I gaze through my window at the sand dunes to the south. Herds of Bactrian camels graze, while tiny desert rodents scurry into their holes to avoid our path and imminent death. I am in familiar territory. I’ve been here before. The sights are the same as they were when I travelled through this terrain during my first year in Mongolia, but now, three years later, something has changed.

Tiny dots on the horizon indicate that we are close to our destination. As we draw nearer, dots become domes, domes become gers; many are clustered together forming a tourist camp, which will be our accommodation for the next two days; an oasis in the desert. Our small group slides out of the van, eager to relieve our stiff legs after our long journey.

I stretch tall and watch as our guide enters the ‘Reception’ tent, and reemerges, followed by a woman dressed in a long blue silk robe and carrying a familiar shiny object. Her hands are outstretched, with a khadag12 lying across her palms, and in her right hand I see a small silver cup ...

... I see a small silver cup ...

... I see a small silver cup ...

...
... I see a small silver cup. I am unfamiliar with what is happening in front of me and nervous to hold the shiny object. As instructed by Zaya, I have my right hand outstretched and my left under my right elbow as I reach for the silver cup. I listen attentively for what I must do next. I am hesitant. Hesitant for fear of making a move that might offend my hosts. I don’t know what to expect.

“Take it with two hands.” Zaya gestures to show me the way.

I clasp the silver cup with two hands. I hold tight. I am aware of my clumsiness, knowing that now would be the worst time for my hands to fail me, or perhaps I am stalling. I look up at my host hoping to see that he has diverted his attention to his wife who is focused on what I presume is our dinner – boiled head of a goat – but I am out of luck. He is waiting. Watching me and waiting.

Raising the cup to my mouth I can smell the white liquid. Rancid. A wave of nausea comes over me as the smell enters my nostrils. I look at Zaya with desperate eyes requesting dismissal from this activity. She responds, “It is a great honour to receive arag in the silver cup.”

Arag. I have heard of this. Fermented mare’s milk. I waver. I want to retreat into the comfort of what is familiar to me, but I know that I’ve come too far to turn back. I am pushed further by a force within my being. I look again at my host, then at Zaya, and at the other faces in this space, this space that we are sharing as one. The children are smiling with eyebrows raised. Anticipating. The mother has halted her pot stirring and has her eyes on the cup, then at my eyes, and then the cup. The grandmother speaks and Zaya translates, “She welcomes you to her home ... and she is happy that you are here with her and her son, her family ... ”
I am touched by her words. I am but a stranger to her yet she welcomes me. I am foreign yet my host honours me with his grand offering. I am overcome by a pang of guilt for hesitating the offering. My eyes ask for forgiveness as I raise the silver cup and touch it to my lips. I know what must be done ...

... I know what must be done ...

... I know what must be done ...

...

... I know what must be done. I pull Sam close to me so I can discreetly whisper guidance in his ear. “This is an offering, a sign of respect. Offense will be taken if you refuse the cup.”

“What is it?” asks Sam.

I examine the liquid. “It looks like milk, probably from a goat or horse. Possibly fermented.”

He looks at me with that same hesitation that I once felt when I was in his place. New. Fresh. Foreign. I can remember that place of uneasiness so well, when I was hesitant to join in. But I am a part of this place now, its customs and traditions, and I respect them.

“Just bring it to your lips. You do not have to drink it,” I advise.

He steps forward, takes the silver cup in his hand, and does what I suggest.

It is my turn.

Without fear, hesitation, or wavering, I smile at the woman who is honouring my presence as I raise the silver cup.
My time in Mongolia is limited, and I have chosen to spend my final days touring through the south Gobi Desert with my visiting friend Sam, soaking up the sights and sensations that are quintessential Mongolia. The hum of the van and the visions of camels, sand dunes, and a setting sun calm me as we venture through the familiar territory. The calming effect of the experience suggests that I am comfortable in this place. I feel peaceful in the place that was once very foreign to me but that I have come to know well.

Our tour group arrives at our accommodations and, as the individuals around me observe our surroundings, I recognize the area from when I visited it three years before. Another familiar sight is the shiny object carried by our greeter dressed in traditional Mongolian garb. When I see the silver cup, I am instantly transported back in time to the moment when I first held a silver cup and learned of its significance in the Mongolian culture. In my memory, I describe my hesitancy at receiving the cup and drinking the arag for the first time. I am naive in the unfamiliar surroundings, unaware of the customs, afraid to offend my hosts, and turned off by the foreign substance that I am offered by my host. The time given to these details is important in this vignette as it highlights a significant moment of cross-cultural learning and also serves to contrast my past and present selves.

My friend Sam is also an important aspect of the vignette. Just arrived and travelling through Mongolia for the first time, he represents my past self, when I was the new foreigner, naive and hesitant. Having been down this road before and knowing what to expect, I find myself in a new role as a cultural liaison, advising Sam on how to receive the silver cup. In this role, I
am bordering two places: the foreigner side, where my past self exists, and the Mongolian side, where I understand customs well enough to engage in them fully and comfortably. In the memory of my first encounter with the silver cup, I waver between the fear of the unfamiliar and the fear of offending, but over the three years that I have lived in Mongolia, I have changed. After struggling, learning, adjusting, and adapting, I have become so familiar with what was once so foreign that I eventually consider Mongolia to be a significant part of my self.

**Acculturation**

I have changed. No longer the naive foreigner, I have navigated my way through dissonance and discomfort and found a way to live peacefully in Mongolia. Over the course of the three years that I have lived in the country, I have come to accept and appreciate the cultural customs that are unique to the people that I have grown to know well. In addition, immersion in the customs and traditions of the people has made me feel more connected to the culture, leading me to feel less like a foreigner and more like a local. This change is what many researchers (Berry, 2005; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) describe as the acculturation process. Acculturation refers to the cultural changes one encounters after prolonged integration into another culture, adapting to that culture, but without relinquishing one’s first culture (Berry, 1997; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008). Berry (2005) adds that acculturation involves a “change in a person’s behavioural repertoire … resulting from a long-term process, sometimes taking years” (p. 699).

**Respect and Cross-Cultural Competence**

The silver cup acts as a vessel, sending a message of respect. I learn in my first encounter with the silver cup that Mongolians not only welcome strangers into their homes; they also show
great respect for the visitor by offering a drink from the silver cup. In that moment, I am touched by the actions of my hosts, who, while viewing me as a stranger, reach out to me and honour my presence. In my hands, I held a gift and, in return, I knew that I must communicate my mutual respect and gratitude by overcoming my discomfort, receiving the offer, and raising the cup to drink. In time, as I became more acculturated, I learned that drinking the liquid was not always necessary and that touching it to the lips could still communicate respect and gratitude.

Signs of respect in cross-cultural situations are known to affect the quality of cross-cultural interactions and relationships (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2011). Furthermore, the communication of respect is a significant dimension of cross-cultural communication competence (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Ruben, 1976). In researching communication competency and cross-cultural adaptation, Ruben and Kealey (1979) found that displays of respect and interaction management predicted how participants adjusted to their surrounding culture.

Receiving the cup and consequently learning of its value were parts of my own process of acculturation. My social interactions with the people allowed me to adapt into a new self, with an altered cultural identity. In the Mongolian culture, the silver cup is more than just a respected gift. It is a symbol of wisdom and intelligence. To me, the silver cup, which is always full, represents my change and the accumulation of wisdom that I gained over the three years that I interacted with the people and immersed myself in the Mongolian culture.

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What allows people to adapt and become acculturated into another culture?

Beyond immersion in customs and traditions, how might you become more connected to the culture into which you will become immersed?

How do you show respect for others? How might your signs of respect be received by other cultures? How do other cultures communicate respect to others?
CHAPTER 8: KHADAG
The late June sunrise casts its first rays on the blue, silky khadag\textsuperscript{13} draped across the front windshield window of the taxi. The driver pulls away from my apartment complex, and a sense of loss overcomes me as I take one last look at the place that has become my home.

We leave my neighbourhood and turn onto a busier main road, except at this time of the morning the most action to be seen are a few stray dogs lounging and scrounging for food. I feel warmth hit my face and infuse my body as the sun rises over the horizon, shining golden rays across the land. Leaving Mongolia during early morning twilight and while the city remains asleep feels like a special gift. In the peace and quiet of these early hours, I get to see this place at its most beautiful. We drive down vacant streets, and I feel like the city is mine to absorb. I want so much for my driver to take his time and drive slowly to the airport, allowing me to hold onto this moment, to hold onto Mongolia and my self in this place. A tugging between two opposing feelings resides in my being:

\begin{center}
I am ready to go, but I am afraid to leave.
\end{center}

Memories flash through my mind as we pass by the places that have been a part of my life over the past three years – restaurants, markets, running routes, homes, hills, my school ... – again, I feel a longing to hold on, to turn back, and be in those places for one more look.

\begin{center}
I set my sights forward at the view through the front windshield of the taxi, and in the distance I see a cluster of khadags rippling in the wind above an ovoo\textsuperscript{14}. As we pass the ovoo, my driver predictably raises his hand and honks as a sign of respect to the sky spirit, ensuring a safe journey. Having done this ritual many times on numerous trips through the countryside, I feel
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{13} scarf
\textsuperscript{14} stone cairn
lucky to have had one last chance to be a part of the ritual unique to this place, these people, this culture into which I have grown so close.

The road comes to an end. The sight of the waiting airplane on the runway gives me a lump in my throat and a pain in my heart. I feel the need to reconcile this pain so I address it. I question:

Why are you here with me now,
like this,
when I’ve known for so long that
I am ready to move on?

A conversation with my dissonant heart ensues as I leave the taxi and carry my big, blue backpack into the airport and join the queue at the airline counter. It continues while I fill out my immigration exit form, clear passport control, and enter the departure lounge. I feel the struggle for harmony with each step I take down the hallway towards the plane. It stays with me as I step onto the plane, find my seat, and settle in next to the window. The door closes. I feel the jerk of the plane leaving the gate when we begin to taxi to position for take-off. It is here, in these final moments, when I feel it, acknowledge it, understand it. I am afraid to let go of the place that has shaped me into a person I never knew I could be. I want to hold on to who I am here for fear that the ‘noise’ of my new surroundings will drown out the ‘me’ that I have come to know deeply in this place, this place that has tested me, built me up and knocked me down; shown me sorrow and beauty, loneliness and love, hate and healing.

The engine rumbles as we begin to move forward, accelerating until I feel the ground fall away and we begin our ascent into the sky. With forehead pressed against the window, I draw in
as much as I can of the scene below – the ger districts, buildings, goats grazing on the steppe, the Tuul River winding along the foot of the Bogd Khan Mountain, and the ovoos majestically positioned on the peaks. The last sight I see is a beautiful blue khadag atop the mountain before resting back in my seat and focusing my attention on the sun rising in the blue sky ahead.

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This vignette describes a monumental moment in my journey when I realize that my experience has impacted my identity in a significant, even transformative way. Emotions run high from the beginning to the end, from the moment I drive away from my apartment complex to my last look at the land before turning my sights on the sky ahead. The vignette suggests that I have developed a deep connection to the place in the way that I play with time. I want it to slow down and allow me more time with the important places that have shaped me, but when I arrive at the airport and see the airplane, time seems to speed up upon realizing that the end has come and I must go.

I describe the inner conflict that I experience before my official departure from Mongolia; ready to leave but resisting it at the same time. Wanting to move on but with a lump in my throat and pain in my heart causes a dissonance within myself that I feel I must decipher before I depart Mongolia for good. I am preoccupied with the dissonance for the entire time that I am at the airport and even until the moment before take-off. Right in the last moment before leaving the land, I realize the meaning of my deep emotion.
Although, in my mind, I knew my time in Mongolia was ready to end, the rest of my being felt deeply connected to the place because it had been molded by it, transformed by it. Many of Mongolia’s cultural characteristics had found their way into my identity. I had collected bits of the culture – beliefs, values, customs – and stored them in my soul. I realized that I had been changed so greatly by the experiences I had had in Mongolia, and, as a result, felt strongly connected to the place and the people. Perhaps what most affected my change were the struggles, the moments of great difficulty that taught me to see others in a new way and showed me depths of my true self, a self that I did not know was possible.

**Transformative Learning**

In the final moments before my departure, I reach an important milestone in my journey when my unexpected reaction to leaving Mongolia causes me to engage in critical self-reflection. It is a moment of realization, when I acknowledge how the dilemmas and discoveries throughout my three years in Mongolia have reshaped me in such a significant way that I find it difficult detaching from the place that has taught me so much about culture, humanity, and my own opinions on the world. From the day of my arrival to the day of my departure, I was part of a transformative learning process. The challenges and moments of enlightenment caused shifts in my own worldview and what it means to be human. I left Mongolia with altered ideals and reformed conventions that would surprise the self that I was when I began the journey. Mezirow (1995) describes such a change as transformative learning, which occurs when beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions become transformed as a result of different and disorienting experiences.

Reflection is a key part of the transformative learning process as it encourages a consciousness that allows the learner to make sense of unfamiliar cultural experiences and, in
doing so, realize new beliefs, attitudes, and emotions about the world (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008). The experience also tests one’s taken-for-granted assumptions, meaning perspectives (“set of schemas, worldview, or personal paradigm,” Mezirow, 1995, p. 42), and meaning schemes (“specific set of beliefs, knowledge, judgment, attitude, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation,” p. 43), moving one to merge perspectives, and “take actions to challenge and transform both oneself and the societal status quo” (Brigham, 2011, p. 43).

Just before take-off, I am able to better understand my emotional response to leaving. I yearn to hold on to the self that I have become, afraid of losing the self-awareness and sense of groundedness that I have developed while living in a place that tested my resilience and shown me alternative ways of viewing myself in the world. I feared that my enlightenment would slip away as I crossed borders into a very different world from the one in which I had grown and evolved. O’Sullivan and Morrell (2002) describe my experience best in their definition of transformative learning:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body-awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 18)
The blue khadags waved to me like a loved one saying goodbye. Like the spirit in the sky, they wished me well and blessed my journey, the one I was ending or perhaps the one I was about to begin.

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How will you engage in critical reflection of your self and experiences while you journey and when you leave the country into which you have become immersed?

How will you prepare yourself to cross borders? Why is it important to address this transition?
My belongings are unpacked and spread across the floor. I look at each one of them again and feel glad that they are with me here. Seeing them in front of me brings me comfort. I am grateful that I made the effort to bring them with me to Canada. The familiar objects make me feel less like I do not belong in this place that now feels unexpectedly foreign.

With my eight belongings unpacked, I feel compelled to find a place for them in my new apartment, to put them on display as a reflection of who I am and where I have come from. Perhaps I just want to have them around me so I feel more at home.

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I have returned to Canada noticeably changed and struggling to feel a sense of place. What would generally be a mundane act of walking home through the streets of Kingston is not a mundane act for me on my first day back in my home country. I am emotionally stirred, confused, and confronted with the feeling that I do not belong. It is curious that I, a Canadian, feel so out of place in my own home country. Obedient pedestrians seem so odd in contrast to pedestrian life in Ulaanbaatar, and observing this pedestrian behaviour, as orderly and safe as it is, bothers me. I view the landscape through different eyes, shocked by the immaculately manicured lawns and uniform sidewalks as a result of living in a developing country that at first appeared broken and rundown. Now, back in Canada, I am unsettled by the sight of such
perfection. I am home, yet I am disillusioned by what is supposed to be my home. I cannot ignore the feeling that I do not belong in Canada, my home culture. Even though I became deeply connected to the Mongolian culture, I never truly belonged in that place, and now, as I return to my home culture transformed and feeling disconnected from the Canadian “way of life,” I feel I do not belong here either. So where do I belong? I am in a state of limbo as I straddle two cultures, trying to negotiate my place and authenticate my identity.

**Reverse Culture Shock and Coming “Home”**

The shock, disillusionment, discomfort, confusion, and feeling of displacement that I experienced upon return to my home country are common symptoms of reverse culture shock. Gaw (2000) describes reverse culture shock as the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one’s home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time. Realizing upon return that one’s home culture is different to what it was before moving abroad is the “shock” of the experience. It is not only the changes in the home culture (e. g., places, people, routines, and interactions) that makes home feel so foreign, but also the change to one’s self, one’s cultural identity and worldviews (Storti, 1997). In this sense, returning home is not possible because it no longer exists.

What is “home”? Although a subjective construct, home is often described as a place, like returning to a place of birth (e. g., hometown), a place where there are people of a similar culture, where family lives, where one’s native language can be spoken, and where traditions and cultural customs are carried out (Storti, 1997). In this sense, Home is the place where you are known and trusted and where you know and trust others; where you are accepted, understood, indulged, and forgiven; a place of rituals and
routine interactions, of entirely predictable events and people and very few surprises; the place where you belong and feel safe and secure and where you can accordingly trust your instincts, relax, and be yourself. (Storti, 1997, p. 15)

Belonging neither in Mongolia nor in Canada left me wary, untrusting, and alone. I suspected others misjudged me, viewing me and treating me like the person they remembered from before I went away, and I did the same with them. Struggling to reassimilate and reconcile my sense of belonging, I shared stories of Mongolia and what it was like to live there, hoping that others would grow to understand how I had changed and eventually become acquainted with the new “me,” but I often wondered if it was possible for others to really, truly understand. Although unpleasant at times, reentry is not necessarily a harmful experience, since “frustration, loneliness, and unpleasantness are very often the precursors of insight and personal growth” (Storti, 1997, p. 8). Breaking down others’ assumptions and projecting the new me took effort that I had not expected, but out of the struggle grew increased self-awareness, leading me to reaffirm my identity as an international teacher.

Reverse culture shock can last for a few months to a year or even longer after return to one’s home country (Adler, 1981; Carlisle-Frank, 1992; Gaw, 2000; Storti, 1997). For me, the shock (slowly) dissipated as the months progressed, but I always felt like I had one foot out the door, never fully “here” in Canada. When others questioned my lack of rootedness, I did the same, so I digested their questions to nurture my own understanding of who I am and where I want to be. I wanted to understand why I felt pulled away from my home country, so I reflected on the early days of my life when I was a little child. My earliest memories involve an insatiable curiosity about the world – not only the places but also the people who shared the planet. What
are their experiences? I wondered. How do they compare to mine? What can I learn from them? And, in turn, what can I learn about myself? Those questions drive me forward and draw me back into the expansive, knowledge-rich, experience-giving world. It is not necessarily to be a teacher; it is to be a learner.

Home, to me, is a feeling of belonging, where I can be myself and feel comforted in knowing that I am where I am supposed to be. For now, the journey is my home and, on my back, I carry with me all of the memories that have enriched my life experience thus far.

This Journey of Unpacking

I do believe that we are always in a state of becoming, for life is a process with all of us works in progress. However, there are moments of becoming that hold more significance because of the way they impact our identities. It is not the “snapshot,” or significant story, that is the moment of becoming. The moment of becoming emerges from the act of immersing the self in deep analysis, pulling apart and re/interpreting the significant story as part of the process of critical reflection. These “moments of becoming” are a “transitional space” of learning, a “third space of simultaneous interrelation and separation that is neither self nor other, inner nor outer” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 31), when I am not quite my familiar self, being challenged by the unknown, as part of my learning self in the making.

While engaging in the process of narrative inquiry, I enter into that transitional space, and that is where the learning happens: I know the stories (they are familiar) but, as I unpack them, re/examine them, re/construct meaning, I feel something new. As I navigate through my stories, my exploration brings me to a new landscape. I feel myself changing as my self-concept is
challenged by new insights. I see structures at play that in the past I had not noticed. My stories mean something new. I am someone new.

These moments of becoming are times of change. Embracing change can be ominous because it means entering into the unknown, the different. Thinking of the self in this transitional space, rather than positioned in what is same or different, requires finding comfort in the discomfort of liminality. We are all always participating in our own journeys. As we travel with our metaphorical backpack of experience, we enter into new sensations, acquire new experiences, and carry them with us. Reflective narrative inquiry allows entry into that third, transitional space where we can ‘unpack’ that backpack and discover the nuances of those fleeting moments that have marked their place in our past. While we ‘unpack,’ we are becoming.
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APPENDIX: THE POWER SHUFFLE

Influenced by *White Privilege & Male Privilege* by Peggy McIntosh (1988)

Read each statement and interpret what it means to you personally. If you agree with the statement, move up (indicating more privilege), and if it does not apply to you, move down. As you move from box to box, you will begin to get a sense of your privilege.

I can go shopping or be in public without worrying that I will be followed or harassed.

I am a man.

If a police officer pulls me over, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

I do not identify with the LGBT community.

I have never skipped a meal or been hungry because my family didn’t have enough money to buy food.

I can easily buy toys, magazines, and greeting cards featuring people of my race.

I have been to summer camp.

I was raised by both of my parents.

I have a university degree.