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Toward an Understanding of Cross-Cultural Experiential Education

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Globalization is a word we hear frequently these days, whether in casual conversation, the media or more formal discussions. Around the world people are increasingly interested in establishing relationships with those outside their own nations, their ultimate goals as varied as the projects in which they engage. One such global initiative is cross-cultural experiential education programs designed to provide young people of different nationalities the opportunity to interact with and learn more about one another and themselves. Such programs are rooted in the belief that learning about different cultures is important to an individual's growth, and are based on the understanding that this learning is most effective when participants experience these cultures for themselves. Kraft (1992) wrote that he was "convinced that properly designed international experiences can be and are among the most powerful 'life-changing' experiences that we as learners can have" (p.158).

In the early 1980s a handful of researchers began to explore a theory they termed cross-cultural experiential learning to address this approach to learning about other cultures. Although some attempts were made to determine its conceptual underpinnings the term seems to have largely disappeared from discussion until it was picked up again in the early 1990s, appearing also as cross-cultural experiential education. This term was more recently defined by the [American] National Society for Experiential Learning in 1998, but has still not been studied extensively.

Experiential education is not a new concept. Its roots can be seen to extend back to Socrates and his belief in the contribution of the student to the learning process and the importance of the process itself (Crosby, 1985). Kant (1929)[1781] stated that "There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience" (p.41) and more than a century later, Dewey (1970)[1938] argued that education is grounded in experience. In 1995, Kraft defined experiential education as learning which "must involve the individual in a social learning context, be carried out in a range of learning environments, and be of perceived relevance to the learner" (Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995, p.xii). However, finding a definition of experiential education with which everyone

would agree has proven to be difficult. What has been easier is reaching some agreement on what experiential education is not:

> Knowledge is so much more than the memorization of chemical tables, species lists, or geographic boundaries. It is that which comes from touching, tasting, smelling, and feeling a "loved" environment over an extended period of time. It is not studying "about" something, it is falling in love "with" something. (Kraft, 1992, p.155)

Cross-cultural experiential education is a relatively new branch of experiential education. Kraft, in writing about experiential education, suggested that "What we have not generally considered, however, is the international or cross-cultural settings as experiential learning environments" (p.158). Cross-cultural experiential education is defined by the [American] National Society for Experiential Education as an experience that

> Involves a student in another culture or subculture in a deep and significant way, either as a temporary member of a family, a worker in that society, or as a volunteer in a social agency, with the intention, as a participant-observer, of learning as much as the student can about that culture and his or her own culture. (National Society for Experiential Education, 1998, p.2)

For the purposes of this paper 'culture' will be understood in its broadest sense to be "the total way of life shared by a group of people" (Zaharlick, 1992, p.117).

Cross-cultural experiential education can take place for students within a variety of settings. Students might choose, to name a few examples, to study in another country, to study on a boat that travels the globe (Class Afloat), to take part in an exchange program such as Canada World Youth or Katimavik or to take a course within a traditional school setting that includes a travel component. What differentiates the experience from a trip taken as a tourist is the interaction between the traveler and the people in the community the traveler is getting to know, as outlined in the definition for cross-cultural experiential education.

To understand cross-cultural experiential education we have to return to experiential education. For the purposes of this paper, we will adopt an understanding of experiential education as presented by Herbert (1981). Initially Herbert had perceived experiential education as an 'either/or' situation; learning was either experiential or it was not. However, he came to believe instead that experiential education existed on a continuum, and that specific variables could be identified in order to place the learning on that continuum. Herbert identified these components as reality, risk, responsibility, predictability and analysis or reflection. To gain a clearer understanding of the theoretical relationship between these two terms, these variables will be applied to the cross-cultural experiential education model.

REALITY

Some researchers have expressed concern that in classrooms in the Western world the work being done to teach students about cultures other than their own, despite teachers' best intentions, has been reduced to a 'dine, dress, dance' approach. Bennett (1990) wrote, "It should be clear that minority perspectives are not built only from heroes and success stories, or from an emphasis on foods, fads and festivals" (p.180). This superficial understanding instead emphasizes the differences between the two cultures. These differences are then often mistakenly understood by students as existing within a hierarchical framework, with the culture being studied in a subordinate position (Hoffman, 1999). The difficulty is, how are students to understand cultures beyond their own as unique and different, without seeing them as completely separate? One suggestion is to add a global education perspective, which focuses on the "interdependence among nations," to the multicultural perspective, which has concentrated on "ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism" within the student's own country (Bennett, 1990). This would encourage students to focus on "the qualities people share beneath the surface of cultural differences" (Sarbeck, 1992, p.33) as well as to appreciate the differences. However, does knowledge alone provide the student with an understanding of another culture? Noddings (1992) concluded that

> We suppose that knowledge will reduce misunderstanding, stereotyping, and the almost instinctive fear of strangers. But knowledge alone is unlikely to establish caring relations...Knowing something about other cultures is important and

useful, but it is not sufficient to produce positive relationships. (p.113)

To establish relationships the students must be in the position to interact meaningfully with people from another culture.

Bennett (1990) referred to a model constructed by Hanvey in which he identified four levels of cross-cultural awareness. The first two levels, achieved via books and culture conflict situations, he dismissed as "unbelievable"; the students would not understand other cultures as comprised of humans the same as themselves based on these two modes of education alone. However, he argued that both intellectual analysis and cultural immersion are valid approaches to cross-cultural awareness, the first on a cognitive level and the second because of "subject familiarity" (Hanvey, 1975).

Supporters of cross-cultural experiential education argue that the second of these, cultural immersion, provides students with the opportunity to experience different cultures in a realistic manner. "The lessons of cross-cultural living are not abstract concepts of the classroom, but rather situation-specific..." (Kraft, 1992, p.161). In experiencing what people outside their own culture experience on a day-to-day basis, students are afforded the chance to see both the similarities and differences in comparison to their own lives. The basis for a cross-cultural experience is that the learning be situated in a realistic setting, that there "... is a sense that what is being encountered is real..." (Herbert, 1981, p.209).

RISK

Often a culture is interpreted and presented as something static when it is constantly evolving (Hoffman, 1999). Cultures are made up of individuals, and individuals by definition differ from one another and are each constantly changing. In living side-by-side with people from another culture and within that culture, students have an opportunity to get to know people. This also gives them the opportunity for conversation and the forming of relationships, which enable them to further their understanding of the culture. This idea is confirmed by Noddings (1992) who stated that "When we are struggling to understand, when we are committed to connection but are unsure how to achieve it, we need genuine dialogue with concrete others"(p.120). Furthermore, each one of us is part of a community or culture, and this belonging has had much to do with framing the way in which we

interpret the world around us. Cross-cultural experiences provide students with the opportunity to discover that each person "has a view of the world that is not universally shared... and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one's own" (Bennett, 1990, p.181).

This understanding of another culture does not detract from the students' own cultures, as it is still possible for the students to feel pride in their own cultures and communities, while appreciating cultures other than their own (1990). However, these experiences do demand that the students be open to new perspectives, meaning "the 'I' – rather than remaining apart and unchanging – is fundamentally changed through interaction with others" (Hoffman, 1999, p.470). This openness to change requires that the students each risk letting their own identities be challenged.

People who travel sometimes choose to minimize their involvement with the culture they are visiting. They would rather eat in restaurants with which they are familiar and stay in a hotel that will treat them in the way they would be treated at home. They choose not to enter into relationships that would challenge their own identities. Casella (1999) observed that "educational sight-seeing tour organizations target travelers who desire relaxation and leisure, as well as a bit of separation or distance between themselves and local Latin American people" (p.196). This kind of travel does not fit the definition quoted earlier for a cross-culturally educative experience. A cross-cultural experience demands that the students interact and connect with the people and culture around them. As a result of this kind of commitment "cross-cultural settings... can, and often do, destroy our very sense of selfhood, and put everything we are into question" (Kraft, 1992, p.159). This experience if often described as culture shock.

Culture shock is broken down by Adler into five stages: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence (as cited in Kraft, 1992, p.159). Although people have debated whether or not there are other stages not mentioned in this list and whether or not all people go through each of the stages and in the same order, culture shock is an acknowledged phenomenon. For experiential educators who see risk as an integral aspect of learning, this is a key part of the cross-cultural experience. In forming relationships, the students must question their own backgrounds and identities. It is only in questioning their perspectives that they will be able to see cultures other than their own and make room to accept them. Culture shock is the risk the

travelers take as it "creates some uncertainty or discomfort..." (Herbert, 1981, p. 209) which sets the stage for learning to take place. Kraft (1992) suggested that "it is only when all of the cues which prop up our racial, gender, ethnic, religious, and cultural biases are knocked out from under us, that we can begin the process of becoming caring and compassionate people..." (p.162).

To be able to go through this process of challenging one's perception of self, people need to have a strong sense of their own cultures and own selves at the outset. It is only with such strength that people "can be empathetic in their interrelations with others" (Bennett, 1990, p.176). Living with the initial discomfort and uncertainty that this demands is both difficult and contrary to the way in which people in the Western world generally choose to live. However, it is this ambiguity that makes room for growth and the opportunity for students to each develop their own sense of personal identity.

RESPONSIBILITY

The third variable, responsibility, ensures that "the learner has a sense of ownership for what is undertaken..." (Herbert, 1981, p.209). In a cross-cultural experience the students make the choice to participate, usually help to plan the experience and actively form relationships in the communities in which they are living. The teachers therefore, are not responsible for their students' learning, but responsible for helping them to learn (1981). In giving the students these opportunities Duray-Casares and Penyak (1996), who took a group of students from Mexico City to a distant town within Mexico, were able to meet one of their major objectives, that "students take responsibility for the success of this project" (p.403). They added that the students proved more than able to meet the challenge. Students taking part in a cross-cultural experience have the opportunity to assume real-life experiences that have real-life consequences and responsibilities. The relationships the students form, for example, encourage a sense of responsibility. Sarbeck (1992) wrote about his work leading experiential programs outside of North America that "integrity, care for others, and care for the world become key elements in our interaction" (p. 37).

PREDICTABILITY

Experiential education stressing as it does reality, risk and responsibility is less predictable overall than a transmission based style

of learning, such as the memorization of the periodic table. In the latter, the teacher has a specific outcome in mind and a predetermined approach for achieving that outcome. In contrast, the emphasis on process as opposed to product and student involvement in determining that process in experiential education means that this approach to education is not as predictable (Herbert, 1981). In a cross-culturally educative experience, teachers provide a framework within which the experience takes place, but the students determine for themselves their own involvement in the experience. As such, the exact outcomes of the learning experience cannot be predicted and the actual course the students will pursue is very much up to the individual student.

REFLECTION

After each experience, experiential educators stress the importance of reflection, an exercise as important as the experience itself (Barry, Finkelstein, Mahoney & Pickert, 1998). It is in reflecting upon the experience that students are able to learn. Luckmann (1989) took his students from Seattle on a trip to a Navajo reserve where they lived for four weeks. He assumed that most of their learning would take place while the students were at the reserve. He was surprised to discover that the greatest learning took place once the students had returned home. It was then that they reflected upon their experiences both individually and as a group. As part of this reflection, the students put together a presentation about their experience that they shared with other students at the school. Luckmann noted that "it helped us to integrate and articulate the full meaning of our experience" (p.198). As Herbert said, the experience itself is no more than a vehicle that enables the learning, and as Dewey said, "Learning is thinking about experience" (as cited in Herbert, 1981, p.206).

Just as culture shock is an accepted phenomenon, so too is reverse culture shock (Kittredge, 1996), which people experience upon their return to their homes. Reflection after a cross-cultural experience is a strategy for dealing with reverse culture shock. In addition, by sharing their experiences with others in the school, the students begin to apply that which they have learned in another context, another important component of experiential education.

CONCLUSION

Governments, organizations and schools around the world have invested their resources in creating opportunities for young people

to engage in educative cross-cultural experiences, yet the body of research that exists regarding such initiatives is very small. A study by Wilson (1982) directly addressed the conceptual underpinnings of programs such as these and yet its scope was limited, as Wilson's main objective was to emphasize the importance of cross-cultural experiential learning for teachers. In another article Young (1993) evaluated the effectiveness of cross-cultural experiential learning but he too focussed his efforts on teacher trainees as participants. Both articles add insight to an understanding of cross-cultural experiential education, but their benefit is limited due to the focus adopted by both researchers.

Given the importance proponents of experiential education attribute to cross-cultural experiences, and the prevalence of such programs, it is important to fully understand the theory of cross-cultural experiential education and to investigate the impact such programs are having on participants. The research that has been done to date does not include a thorough investigation of the theoretical underpinnings of such programs, and is limited by a narrow consideration of the participants taking part. Research needs to be conducted to explore cross-cultural experiential education as an extension of experiential education in order to gain a clearer understanding of the theoretical relationship between these two concepts, and to investigate the impact of such experiences on the people who take part in these programs.

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