

A Reflection on Cross-Cultural Competencies: How Attitudes Shaped Experience in Rural India

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents an autoethnographic reflection of one graduate student's experience while interning abroad in rural India over the course of three months. Personal stories illustrating specific attitudes are utilized to demonstrate the use of cross-cultural competencies at play during definable circumstances. The author examines and evaluates "success" through the lens of these attitudes and the impending consequences of actions and beliefs. Results of the reflective process include greater personal and professional insights, in addition to clarity of future implications on career and educational pursuits.

Keywords: Internationalization, study abroad, experiential learning, intercultural competence, self-reflexion

RESUMÉ: Cet article présente une réflexion autoethnographique de l'expérience d'une étudiante diplômée qui a fait un stage à l'étranger en Inde rurale pendant trois mois. Les histoires personnelles ont été utilisées pour illustrer des comportements de compétences interculturelles dans des circonstances spécifiques. L'auteure examine et évalue le « succès » à travers des attitudes et les conséquences imminentes d'actions et de croyances. L'auteure montre les résultats du processus de réflexion comprenant une plus grande compréhension de soi et de vie professionnelle, en plus de clarifier des implications futures sur la poursuite de carrière et d'activités éducatives.

Mots-clés: internationalisation, études à l'étranger, apprentissage expérientiel, compétence interculturelle, autoréflexion

Introduction

Within the educational field, experiential and applied-learning scenarios provide fertile ground for improved

student outcomes in addition to professional and personal development. High impact activities include: “study abroad, learning communities, service learning, student– faculty research, and senior capstone experiences” (Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim, 2015, p. 75). Each of the aforementioned practices represents avenues for academic programs to offer international experiences for students. Increased complexities due to the current global context highlight the need for individuals, organizations, and institutions to prepare for a new perspective of citizenship and to respond accordingly. Increasingly, educational institutions are expanding outcomes to include the necessary adaptive skills that must be gained to successfully navigate the increasingly diverse settings students encounter. With the aim of supporting the development of culturally competent students, universities and colleges welcome international students to participate in and experience education within a foreign setting. Meanwhile, other students engage in this goal by taking their studies abroad. These programs, as Dietz and Baker (2018) noted, offer the transformational potency and potential of every interaction and relationship for the individual to build further capacity. Holistically, institutions of higher learning encourage students to consider experiential learning in the pursuit of becoming culturally competent professionals (Canfield, Low & Hovestadt, 2009). This melding of experiences ideally adds to an enriching campus community that prioritizes and celebrates unique cultural differences. Exploring the topic of internationalization, Harari (1992) stated, “having many international students on a campus does not make that institution international” (p. 75). Indeed, the mere presence of individuals, students, and staff with diverse experiences does not solely contribute to nor create an internationalized environment. The enabling ability of an academic community “to function in an international and intercultural context” requires skills, or competencies, that include the “ability to understand, appreciate, and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations” (de Wit, 2002, p. 96). Since McClelland (1973) first proposed competencies as a basis for performance, the novel technique has permitted foundational research across academic disciplines. Hereafter, this reflective paper applies those competencies most attributed to success in responding to cultural differences.

Defining intercultural competency remains elusive among scholars, having not yet found an agreement on the term in over 40 years. Notably, Klemp (1979) explained how “competence can be measured. But its measurement depends first on its definition” (p. 41). Similarly, when melding action and intent, a methodology that honours and assesses “both the presence of the behaviour and inference of the intent” must be considered (Boyatzis, 2009). Curran (2003) equated competence as appreciation and ability to interact with foreign locals, the development of familiarity, and a level of ease in integration within a new environment or experience in addition to the ability to self-reflect. Linking applicability to institutional use, Deardorff (2006) examined another widely-utilized definition presented by Byram (1997) that positioned cultural competency as “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and revitalizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a role” (p. 34).

For the purpose of this reflective paper, I would like to examine the portion of cultural competency that Deardorff (2009) defined as building “authentic relationships by observing, listening, and asking those who are from different backgrounds to teach, to share, to enter into dialogue together about relevant needs and issues” (p. xiii), as it most closely aligns with my personal experiences while studying abroad. Pulling from Phataks’ (1992) perspective that included empathy, a positive attitude, and emotional stability, these factors also played a significant role in my success. The addition Mendenhall, Kühlman, and Stahl (2001) provided in recognizing the ability to trust in people completes the foundation from which I evaluate and define cultural competency.

While cultural competency is definable and measurable, attitude reflects a component of affective perspective necessary to achieve the desired competency outcome (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Fantini (2000) likewise linked attitude as a precursory component when he described and outlined four main dimensions within intercultural competence, namely: knowledge, skill, attitude, and awareness. The characteristic and presence of attitudes is often assumed as a baseline truth and accepted easily (UNESCO, Leeds-Hurwitz, & Stenou, 2013). This presence influences intercultural interaction and underlies communication. Hunter (2004) proposes a Global

Competence Checklist wherein attitude is described as the “recognition that one’s own worldview is not universal” (p. 115) and must be present for an individual “to be considered globally competent” (p. 114). Just as attitude marks the start of Hunter’s (2004) suggested competency checklist, Okayama, Furuto, and Edmondson (2001) emphasize its utilization and maintenance when seeking and obtaining knowledge and skills amidst building new relationships.

Deardorff (2006) additionally concluded from the frameworks she examined regarding cultural competencies that attitude represents a fundamental entry-point for the learning process to occur; “specifically, the attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) are viewed as fundamental to intercultural competence” (p. 255). These four fundamental attitudes form the themes from which my reflective stories are built.

Methodology

This reflective paper utilizes elements of an autoethnographic study to illustrate my experience as a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholar fulfilling a three-month internship abroad in rural India. As a form of narrative writing, autoethnography invites readers into the lived experiences of the author and the social context from which they are constructed (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Cultural analysis and consideration is additionally engaged within the autoethnographical process (Chang, 2008). Primary features of this methodology include the fact that it “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). These features are viewed as strengths, as opposed to limitations. Self becomes the lens of portrayal. From this perspective of examination, illumination of self-identity occurs with the purpose of understanding who we are in the evolution of story-telling (Ellis, 2004; Goodson, 1992).

My aim in this reflective paper was to examine my experience and use of cross-cultural competencies, namely attitude, while fulfilling my internship. Data was constructed through a detailed account of how I utilized specific attitudes during events and circumstances I experienced while in India. This method of reflection served an opportunity to apply

Chang's (2008) autoethnographic advice of utilizing multiple entry-points, including self-observation, self-questioning, contextual analysis, and personal memoirs in order to attach meaning and intimacy within the narratives shared. Frank (2010) demonstrated how "stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided" (p. 3). My time in India worked on me in immensely transformative ways, forcing me to ask of myself why I was able to navigate challenging situations with positivity and a growth-mindset throughout. Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) insightfully articulated a facet of my lived understanding, that "the more perceptual and conceptual discriminations an individual can bring to bear on the event, the more complex the construction of the event and the richer the experience will be" (p. 492). As Gilmore and Natrajan-Tyagi (2011) described, an autoethnographic work may present itself in a variety of ways, however the methodology itself links together all forms in a manner that "requires a writer to bare his/her soul, and then let others reflect what they want about it" (p. 325). Offering these stories allows me to share how my attitudes influenced experiences, thereby shifting my intentions in moving forward within higher education.

Personal Stories

Context

In late 2016, I responded to a request for applications from the Office of Internationalization with the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education. The opportunity was open to all graduate students currently enrolled in a graduate program who were under the age of 35 and interested in interning with a partner agency, Development Alternatives (DA), in India. Since my first semester of university undergraduate classes after enrolling in a History of India course on the University of Victoria campus, I envisioned visiting the land and meeting the people there. This desire came to fruition after I and another scholar were awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholarship to fill a fall 2017 placement in rural India. My placement included evaluating the partner agency's supplemental women's literacy initiative within the Bundelkhand region that employed local village women as teachers for six months to run formal classes for neo-literate women. Here, village

women could congregate to practice their numeracy and literacy skills. These classes were offered six days a week and provided a critical link for enhancing skill from functional literacy (two to three words per minute) to more a practical and applicable level necessary for daily living. As an observer and evaluator of classroom dynamics, I had the opportunity to visit 10 village sites, and as a researcher, to complete a comprehensive impact assessment report of the program. Interactions with my local office staff colleagues and villagers influenced my views and this is reflected in my personal stories. Throughout my journey of self-reflection, I used cross-cultural competencies, which served me well during the highlights as well as the challenges I experienced abroad. Perhaps most consistent was my attitude: a desire to learn and to grow from whatever presented itself along the way.

Respect

Walking across the dust-caked campus, I tried my best to embody the spirit and femininity of the clothing I was wearing. The past few weeks I had grown accustomed to the traditional clothing of kurtas and pajama pants, however, this day was different. I was wearing my first saree in India. Earlier episodes of near comedic tragedy had left me close to exhaustion as I wondered how impossible of a task dressing in this manner must be for just one woman alone to do. Leaving my dignity in my hostel room, I scurried down the path to one of the women who lived on campus and communicated to her with a balled-up piece of fabric that I needed help. She became my early-morning savior on several occasions after this one. I recount this day because I recognize its significance in shifting attitudes within the office I worked in. Initially, I found the reception cool as distance was placed between me, a white woman from Canada, who they assumed held privilege and class, and my male office counterparts. However, relationships began to open to me as I continued my expression of respect and sincere enjoyment of dressing in cultural attire. When wearing a saree, I was offered the opportunity to share the joy I was experiencing in being immersed so fully in rural Indian living. This pride proved the catalyst for one of my female coworkers to confide in me about how much the staff enjoyed seeing me in Indian clothing. She explained that it showed a level of respect for their culture, one that they, as

professionals, have lost in adhering to traditional Western wear in the office.

As my transport into villages required accompanying a field staff member on the back of a motorcycle, more simple traditional attire was worn so as to help me earn the title as a distinguished and respectable guest and visitor. The village women would often question me as to why I did not wear the same toe rings that they did, signifying my status as a married woman. I simply had not shopped for any as of yet. Nonetheless, they were always visibly pleased to see me in bangles and earrings.

During my field visits, showing and honestly reflecting reverence for all spiritual practices in each of the villages I entered was of particular importance to me; I aimed to be a participant in all that I did, which demonstrated my respect among the villagers. I anticipated and looked forward to my very first vermilion bindi, a powdered dot placed on my forehead between my eyes. With eyelids lowered I received it from a beautiful young woman as I entered the first village on my assignment followed by a welcoming chant sung by the local woman leader. Sitting cross-legged among the women who I would come to call my sisters helped me shift my perspective from being a teacher to a learner. Situating myself into a space of respect and honour for their struggles as well as their lessons impacted me immensely in being able to regard them as my sisters and me theirs. Respect helped break that first wall that prohibited an intimate relationship from flourishing.

Openness

A willingness to try new things served as closely as a motto I took with me on this experience. What I learned along the way was how much that attitude would serve me. I had been told that India was a tough place to be: a hard nut to crack, so to speak. These expressions accurately describe the undertone of what I initially experienced. There was an undefinable cultural subtlety that ran below the surface of most interactions, almost imperceptible but nevertheless present and in motion at all times. Despite how this challenge played on my insecurities, remaining open to whatever presented itself helped me build patience in a professional setting as well as trust in my personal relationships. One area where openness served me particularly was in my visits to the villages. Here, villagers explained how “guests were their gods” and enjoyed treating me to every luxury a god would

require. Coming from a culture where our greatest models of service meet those they work with at their level, I felt awkward. In addition, I describe myself as being naturally shy. So, entering into a village and assuming a place of honour required a lot of humility and grace on my part. Accepting food and drink in every home visited became an exercise of gratitude as much as it was an exercise of the stomach. Nevertheless, taking part in the cultural “way of things” pleased my hosts so tremendously I could not think of denying them that honour. One day, while members of the office were preparing for a literacy award ceremony in a partnering village, I began to take a walk down the long thoroughfare street, examining the flora and enjoying witnessing the impact and integration of agriculture in this community. On my return, I stopped as one villager did not move out of my walking path, as the others had previously. I was surprised; however, I am thankful that my immediate response was not fear. I remained curious. Both curious and interested in what this young man intended of me. In an act of reverence, he bowed himself to the ground and proceeded to place his hands upon my feet, then his head, then back to my feet. I understood the significance of this act of respect and could not believe he would honour me in this way. As difficult as it was and as lowly as I felt, I received his expression into the depths of me and allowed myself space to feel how sacred it was. Remaining open in this capacity has helped serve me in my transition back to Canadian life, reevaluating my previous pursuits. I find less discomfort in unstructured moments and spontaneous circumstances. I now conscientiously grant myself permission to be more bold in my actions and to receive recognition when it reflects sincere effort. The villagers helped me overcome many of my self-doubting tendencies, simply because they were so willing to fill that space with unconditional love.

Curiosity

The first voyage I took riding sidesaddle on the back of a motorcycle brought me past ancient palaces and crumbling city gates. On winding dirt roads, the smell of newly-harvested peanuts roasting filled my nostrils as I admired a beautifully ridged mountain; and as perfect as could be, a mountain goat stood silhouetted against the blue sky. A path of red soil exposed itself from repeated use among the brushy landscape. Finally, we arrived at the desired location and

were greeted by the village women preparing for their lesson in a small, simple concrete building. It had become apparent that the field staff assigned to assist me in getting into the villages lacked the language skills necessary for translation and Google Translate only works when there is adequate Internet connectivity. Panic and discomfort arose inside of me. I refused the offered red plastic chair at the front of the classroom and sat among the women bordering the edges of the rough woven carpet. Time to work. I really had very little comprehension of the fine details of the instruction provided, however after only 15 minutes I filled three full pages of observations. Noting insights on reluctant learners, student evasion techniques and leadership capacities coming to play among the group, I looked down at my paper in joyful shock at what I had recorded. Perhaps not knowing the language and remaining curious made it possible for me to question and observe behaviour more acutely. But here is the link: I loved it. And I am possibly good at it. I came away with questions for reflection, additional pieces for discussion, and suggestions for improved practice. I can do this. This simple experience highlighted another avenue that is pulling me to where I believe I naturally fall in the spectrum of education: administration.

As the local teacher wrapped up her lesson, I imagine the counter-Canadian context of entering classrooms and working with teachers to improve practice and celebrate pedagogical successes. A warm hand on my shoulder pulled me back to the present. A group of village women had crowded to speak to me, in Hindi. This time, the common language we connect through is excitement and collective celebration; a sister of theirs just demonstrated her challenged attempt of reading a paragraph. I witnessed the communal pride of learning in an idealized Western educational setting in the most backwards region of rural India. I was humbled and inspired. These were women supporting women. They affectionately spoke about learning from one another, sharing with, and encouraging their fellow class sisters. Our farewells that day extended from the classroom, through the village, and onto the back of my return ride home; I smiled. I knew I was leaving with more questions than answers. There was more to this experience than I could articulate both then and now.

Discovery

I conveniently ignored the pieces of me that I didn't want to exist: my biases and my judgements I inherited from my environment and experiences. Some of these biases I certainly formed recklessly and freely on my own. At some point in my travels in India, I was forced to examine these truths and choose to transcend them. I was intent on making the most of this mid-life discovery journey; my five kids and husband deserved a better me, after all. Professionally, I observed some amazing, passionate teaching. I also saw some things I would never want to see repeated in a classroom again. Threading the various locations and experiences together were the village women: unique and yet unified in their learning. I admire these women immensely. I saw teenagers learning aside grandmothers, breastfeeding babies milk-drunk on laps, and young children practicing their letters alongside their caretakers. The inclusiveness of this community was something I have never experienced before and finding it was a discovery I wasn't expecting.

I am ashamed to admit my own fear and distrust caused by the projection of how I felt about the world and my place within it. The market stands of weary old men alongside vibrantly young, rambunctious boys once filled me with concern for my safety and personal well-being. Of course, it is an adjustment to recognize yourself as the only female in a sea of men; nevertheless, those moments exposed my truest desire: to trust and to love. Discovering the capacity to do so remains one of my greatest accomplishments. Leaving the final village on my stop of farewells, red vermillion powder speckled my entire face from all the blessings, and burgundy lipstick kisses clung to my cheeks with pride. I could not feel more full than I did in that moment. I promised the women participating in the literacy program to advocate for them to the best of my ability: to be their voice and to present their pleas with the same respect and grace they had extended to me by sharing and bearing their souls. With greater clarity, I understood the transformative power available when alternating between the role of learner and the role of teacher. I learned about perseverance when one woman's husband didn't agree with the concept of his wife being educated and 15 passionate village women showed up at the door to convince him otherwise. I learned about legacy when another woman explained the transformative process her education has had on her household; additional piecemeal work was

picked up to send their youngest child, a daughter, to English medium school. I taught about pursuit in educational drive and persistence when challenges arise, creating space for duty but also valuing and investing in myself as a lead educator in my home and family. I taught friendship when I reached out to make connections, unwavering in my concern and compassion even when the same was not always reciprocated in my direction. Most of all, I discovered self. Within that discovery emerged a woman who found passion in sharing her experiences and those of her sisters: a future trajectory in previously unmarked territory.

Linking My Stories to the Literature

Despite the variety of scenarios experienced in my time abroad, reflective analysis of these shared stories helps illuminate for me the critical role competencies played throughout my internship. Benefits of participation in similar study-abroad programs cross dimensions of academia, sociality, vocation, and culture, with student attitudes reflecting desire and willingness to learn (Pachmayer, 2014). The various attitudes I embodied, as reflected in my stories, enabled and prepared me for enriching learning experiences and personal/professional growth to occur. These revelations were not necessarily consciously present immediately; they required distance, personal observation, and self-questioning to become impactful and to lead changed behaviour (Chang, 2008). Bakhtin (1986) poignantly explains, “in the realm of culture, outsidersness is a most powerful factor in understanding” (p. 7). The gap between feeling outside of the culture and embraced within varied significantly. These variations offer another lens of reflection as to whether my associated attitudes created or bridged the distance I was feeling. Other moments of clarity shifted my experience in India dramatically and helped me build from a position of strength and confidence.

Earlier in this paper I defined my experience abroad as successful. Recognizing the subjectivity of such a claim, I offer a definition of success relatable to the context of this reflection. As Hunter (2004) explored the research surrounding global competency, success included the reflection of “capacities such as the ability to collaborate across cultures... the ability to live outside one’s own culture, and successful participation on project-oriented academic or vocational experiences with people from other cultures and

traditions” (p. 111). However, experience suggests a more interpersonal element to competency that includes the interplay of affective, cognitive, and behavioural components Deardorff (2009) describes. At play is empathy and an enhanced ability to relate to others from different cultural backgrounds. Despite the mental processing I attempted prior to my travels abroad, I now recognize the wisdom and depth of learning available through applied-learning scenarios; “as an actor in an intercultural situation, an individual receives impressions that go beyond the pure theoretical studying of interculturally competent behaviour, including emotions, dynamics, and expressions of values” (Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018, p. 494). Exploring the concepts of ethnorelativism where cultural context is the method for relative understanding, Bennett (1993) links the ability to form empathetic relationships. This ability assumes a shift of reality or frame of reference for the purpose of communal comprehension. It is important to note the fluid and dynamic process that occurs as cultural intelligence (CQ) is gained and competencies strengthened. Returning home from India, I can now more clearly see the success in that experience expressed through my changed desires and pursuits. Attitude permitted growth, which in turn affected trajectory.

Conclusion

Pursuing a graduate degree required a significant amount of trust in myself and my ability as a formal leader. This confidence was once again tested when I successfully received a scholarship to intern in India. As I prepare for the third and final step in my Master of Education in Interdisciplinary Studies, I recognize the impact those three months had on my perspective and my capacity of learning and leadership. To fulfill the third step in the University of Calgary MEd degree program, students must select a problem of practice to research. Plentiful and dynamic options for exploration remain at my fingertips as a result from my interactions abroad. At the heart of the matter is the self-realization of a desire to share my stories and experiences. This sharing ideally reflects the reverence and love I came to uncover for the women I worked with and the attitudes I brought with me to those relationships and settings. In order for this reflection to be of use beyond self, I must believe that my stories serve as examples for action, for challenging assumptions and for inspiring growth beyond personally

imposed limitations. In her account of returning from Kenya to her Western life, Gilmore (2011) described how:

Each person who listened to my story was reminded of his or her own journey. Their stories were different from mine, but they found familiarity: a calling to help, embarking on adventures that taught them about multiple ways of being, weaving an old life with a new experience. I was not supposed to teach people about my experience. I was to share a story, which just happened to be mine, so that others could remember their own experiences. (p. 330-331)

Herein is the challenge of integration. Making meaning for others of the meaning uncovered, then realizing that these lived experiences can only be explored individually. Nevertheless, the power of expression and exploration are fundamental to learning and to growth. As Knight (2003) defined, internationalization within the educational context is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 11). Canfield, et al. (2009) likewise encouraged instructors of higher education to “explore, utilize, and document instructional methods” that facilitate cultural immersion opportunities (p. 321).

My initial intentions of professional pursuit did not necessarily include any international component, nor connection to India: a country I now feel deeply committed to. Future explorations of collaborative learning environments are at play, as well as questions regarding motivation for expanding learner capacity and knowledge. From any vantage, examining learning in an international and multicultural context is much more defined in importance and relevance for me contextually since my internship, thus emphasizing the importance of naturally acquiring and utilizing cross-cultural competencies. Endorsed by Deardorff (2009), the cultivation of these competencies occurred within the framework of authentic relationships. India became my sacred ground for experiential learning and development and offered a road to follow to deepen my awareness and examine myself with curiosity, resolve, and vigour. Ideally, this responsiveness will translate into better connections as I continue on my path as learner and as teacher, conscious now of the truth that “all differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything” (Vivekananda, 1915). This oneness only opened to me

because of the kindness extended by my Indian sisters; a gift I hope to share with the world.

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