'Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone': Pre-Service Teachers' Reflections on International Service-Learning

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Abstract
Within the field of teacher education, international service-learning (ISL) provides a unique opportunity to help future graduates develop intercultural awareness and competency. This is significant given the diverse range of cultural backgrounds found in many schools, and particularly in many major urban settings. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in the area of ISL, the author's previous research has revealed the potential danger of these cross-cultural experiences to perpetuate, rather than challenge stereotypes and ethnocentric viewpoints, which accentuates the importance of research that considers not only students' learning experiences, but also the theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical practices implemented in these programs. This paper reports on a recent case study of Australian pre-service teachers abroad on a short-term ISL and cross-cultural program focused in the area of Teaching English as a Second Official Language (TESOL). The paper discusses students' learning and critical self-reflection in relation to the themes of challenging cultural stereotypes, becoming more culturally aware, and developing pedagogical understanding. The students' reflections are analysed with regards to their learning experiences, as well as discourses in the internationalisation of higher education. The analysis uncovers the transformative potential, as well as precariousness of students 'stepping out of their comfort zone' in these short-term cross-cultural experiences.

Keywords: intercultural competency; higher education; diversity; cross-cultural competency

Introduction

As a teacher educator, I am interested in exploring how pre-service teachers experience overseas practicum placements and how they view these experience in relation to the development of their professional competencies. With over 10 years of experience leading cross-cultural and international service-learning (ISL) for tertiary students, I have witnessed the potential of these types of placements to be catalysts for meaningful personal and professional learning to occur, for myself as well as my students. However, I am also acutely aware of the precariousness of student mobility programs and experiences – particularly surrounding the implications of sending students from the Minority World into Majority World contexts – that may further perpetuate cultural stereotypes, and create or subjugate the cultural 'other'. Therefore, my own critical self-reflexivity is paramount in taking on the responsibility for leading ISL in pre-service teacher programs as I endeavor to scaffold students' learning and development of intercultural competencies.

I was drawn to the following quote while reflecting on a recent ISL practicum where I led a group of Australian students to teach English in East Asia:

"*I believe it is important to respect the culture and experiences of various groups in order to understand, learn and develop my own teaching practices and I hope to get the opportunity to continue doing this into the future, and continuously learn about new strategies and teaching pedagogies to assist students with a non-English speaking background.*

This trip has inspired me to take a step out of my comfort zone more. As challenging as it has been at some points, it has also been a lot of fun and I have learnt many new things, not only about the country and its people, but also about myself."

This quote was a student's response when asked if and how the experience had contributed to their intercultural competency. The quote speaks to the potential of ISL to create transformative learning experiences for students, and in this case, provide facilitated opportunities to consider different perspectives, become aware of and move beyond ethnocentric viewpoints, and to be challenged to put into practice culturally responsive teaching approaches and pedagogies. Needless to say there are limits to these short-term experiences and caution is required to critically examine their purported outcomes; however, the opportunity to *inspire students to step out of their comfort zones* and to learn about the broader global context and themselves is a powerful 'activating event' (see Arnzen, 2008; McGonigal, 2005; Mezirow, 1991, 2000) when teaching for transformation. Furthermore, it may contribute to ongoing critical reflexivity and dialogue to examine innovative ideas and approaches for effective teaching in the diverse contexts of 21st Century classrooms.

Diversity and International Service-Learning in Teacher Education

Within the field of teacher education, international service-learning (ISL) provides a unique opportunity to help future graduates develop intercultural awareness and competencies. This is especially significant within a continuously changing 'Western' Minority World context, such as Australia, since "…the range of cultural backgrounds in Australian schools is considerable and extends from remote schools with

Indigenous children to urban settings with children from Asian, Middle-Eastern, South American, African or European backgrounds" (Synott, 2009, p. 134). The impact of globalisation and the ways in which it has brought cultures into contact with each other in unprecedented ways places new demands on teachers. For example, teachers are expected to have an openness to other cultures, an ability to understand different cultural contexts, and an awareness of global issues. This is exemplified by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, published by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2008). The declaration acknowledges the demands that globalisation has placed on Australian education, stating "As a consequence, new and exciting opportunities for Australians are emerging. This heightens the need to nurture an appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship" (p. 4). The document itself is reflective of globalised educational policy that increasingly emphasises notions of global citizenship.

Research in the field of internationalisation in higher education has grown exponentially in recent years (Montgomery, 2013; Streitwieser, 2014). Defined as "…the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary [i.e. tertiary] education" (Knight, 2003, p. 2), internationalisation strategies often include student and staff mobility, internationalising the curriculum, branch campuses, and cross-institutional cooperation agreements, amongst others (Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Mertova, 2013). While all of these are substantial features of internationalisation policies, of particular interest to teacher education research is outbound student mobility through service-learning and its impact on graduate outcomes in relation to intercultural understanding.

International service-learning includes elements of community volunteer work, study abroad, and global education, and is becoming increasingly prevalent in higher education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). However, while ISL is a large component of many internationalisation strategies, there are strong critiques of the extent to which these programs assist students in developing intercultural awareness and competencies (Razack, 2005; Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). My previous research conducted with pre-service teachers revealed the potential danger for these cross-cultural experiences to perpetuate, rather than challenge cultural stereotypes and ethnocentric viewpoints, particularly if these experiences are not facilitated and scaffolded through ongoing critical reflexivity and dialogue (Truong, 2007, 2015).

Correspondingly, Caruana (2010) notes that a determining factor for intercultural dialogue in students' learning experiences is an academic's view and understanding of internationalisation. Therefore, insight into the pedagogies and practices of academic staff to scaffold students' cross-cultural learning is another emerging frontier for exploration, especially within the current educational landscape and national curriculum rollout in Australia, and its focus on Asia. While the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA, n.d.) has identified Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia as one of three cross-curriculum priority areas, there remains limited research that examines how 'Asia literacy' is conceptualised or addressed in teacher education programs across Australia. Salter (2014) argues that 'Asia literacy' struggles for purchase in Australian education and curriculum statements are relatively broad regarding how the priority area will be addressed

across learning areas. Thus, there is also impetus to understand how 'Asia literacy' is viewed and implemented in teacher education and school settings (Salter, 2013, 2014).

Methodology

Thus, this paper examines the ongoing research-teaching nexus that has emerged over the past several years. As such, it represents my action-oriented living practice and reflection upon my current and future research. This research is grounded in ethnographic approaches, which are characterized by direct participant observation, researcher's reflexivity, interviews and in-the-field research conversations, and flexible and evolving research process (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, in my research I am guided by critical and poststructural approaches. In the tradition of critical inquiry this qualitative research seeks not only to understand students' experiences with ISL, but also to effect change by facilitating critical self-reflexivity in order to develop more inclusive and culturally responsive learning and teaching practices. Reflexivity goes beyond reflection and involves not only being critically aware of one's viewpoint, but being able to situate it within relationships of power, discourse, and knowledge. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1971), the concept of discourse helps us to understand a particular way of meaning-making within specific contexts and power relations, such as cultural representation and intercultural understanding while occupying spaces abroad.

The analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Strauss & Corbin 1998). Research conversations and narratives were analysed by identifying similarities and differences of ideas within and across the data, which formed the basis for broader research themes to emerge. Poststructuralist concepts of power, discourse, and subjectivities were applied throughout the analysis. In the following discussion the participants' views and practices were explored through their narratives on developing self-awareness, pedagogical understanding, and empathy.

Developing Awareness

While the students' everyday encounters in Australia involve cross-cultural interactions, the process of crossing borders, traveling overseas, and being immersed in a new environment created a unique context for them to explore intercultural learning. Furthermore, traveling with a group of students, particularly pre-service teachers, and working on a daily basis with the local host institution, generated what many students referred to as a sense of cultural immersion. This was viewed as quite distinct from overseas travel for tourism and leisure, based on the unique partnership with the local host institution and the service-learning purpose of the trip.

The ISL practicum required the students to pair with a local counterpart teacher to prepare and deliver lesson plans for secondary students. This afforded students the opportunity to observe local teachers' practices and to collaborate together on a daily basis to generate effective and engaging learning activities in this cross-cultural context. This process itself, while challenging, provided many insights into the ways in which the Australian students viewed the learning experience and their intercultural learning, through journaling, daily debriefs and group discussions. Over the course of three weeks, the students were asked to reflect on the impact of the experience on the

development of their intercultural awareness and competencies. While the responses were diverse, one of the common themes was that being encouraged to remain open to different cultural understandings also required a high level of self-awareness; therefore intercultural competency necessitates the development of cultural- and self-awareness as expressed by two students in the following quotes:

"Intercultural interaction and cultural competencies play an integral part within globalisation and the spreading and sharing of knowledge. It then also becomes a valuable learning curve for all students, especially experiencing it firsthand. The aim is to reduce stereotyping and making judgements without even experiencing or putting yourself into the position. It is important to be open minded, accepting and also teachable in contexts like this as every opportunity is a valuable one."

"I learnt to take into account that each student is different and has had differing personal and life experiences, as well as differing skills, beliefs, values and interests and it is vital to take these things into consideration."

These are important pedagogical and humanistic reflections where the students understand their role in the construction of cultural understanding and representation. While this is subject matter that is taught in teacher education courses, these particular reflections become significantly more meaningful and resounding when they are learned through the experience of being immersed in another culture and being a participant-observer in the classroom.

Developing Pedagogical Understanding

The sense of cultural- and self-awareness is interrelated with the development of new pedagogical understanding, which was particularly important for the pre-service teachers in this group who all had varying levels of experience in schools and classrooms. Taking on the responsibility of teaching students in this cross-cultural context was viewed as important preparation to teach in highly diverse Australian classrooms, as shared in the following two quotes:

"It helped me develop strategies in being able to deliver information in multiple ways while keeping students engaged. I have realised that teaching requires a lot of patience and trial and error, and that you shouldn't give up, even when things don't go according to plan, because in the end the small goals account for so much more."

"I feel like I have a greater appreciation for wanting to find different techniques and activities to engage learners. I found it challenging to find out what my students were capable of, most of my lessons were trial and error, however there was more of a personal incentive and determination to find activities that worked. I would love to see my knowledge put into practice, being more considerate when working with students who have English as an additional language."

These reflections demonstrate the students' understanding of the Australian context where many of them will likely teach in the future. For example, research suggests that Australian public schools in large urban centres, such as Sydney and Melbourne, reflect the country's cultural diversity. Ho (2011) found that two-thirds of children in Australia attend public schools, and across Sydney, 50% or more are from language

backgrounds other than English. This underpins the important work pre-service teachers and educators must embark upon to think more critically about intercultural engagement, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom. Additionally, these narratives suggest an evolving understanding of the *soft* skills for effective teaching, such as patience, flexibility, responsiveness, determination, and continual reflection and action to refine approaches based on learners' diverse backgrounds and needs.

Developing Empathy

The experiential and authentic learning opportunities afforded by ISL practicum placements engage students in embodied educational experiences. The sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and tactile connections that are made in tandem with the social relationships gained, create a holistic learning experience. I have witnessed in the past how these experiences potentially engage students across different developmental areas, including physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains. These lived experiences have the potential to resonate more meaningfully and affectively with students. In the example below, the experience of being in another country, and in this case being a minority, provided the student with a new understanding of what it might be like to go to school in Australia as an immigrant or student with a different background than the majority:

"I guess I never really understood what it was like going to another country and being a minority and not knowing the language. This has allowed me to step back and realise how it made me feel, and how it might make students who are foreign to Australia feel, for example, shy, intimidated, withdrawn etc., which is understandable, however I feel like that shouldn't determine their potential."

This particular experience demonstrates how ISL placements provide a space for the development of empathy and self-reflexivity. While this process may emerge organically amongst the students individually or within the group, it should not be taken for granted that these understandings will be self-cultivated. Therefore, academic staff leading these experiences must strike a balance between understanding and recognizing students' points of view and challenging them to explore new perspectives and theoretical frameworks that provides lenses for viewing the world differently.

Fostering a Deeper Understanding of Culture

The approach taken to guide critical self-reflexivity for myself and students on this ISL placement was grounded largely by Freire's (1970) critical pedagogies and concept of praxis, and Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformative learning theory. As the academic staff member leading this practicum placement, as well as a participant observer present with the students for the duration of the trip, but also on a daily basis while they were teaching, I was able to observe them in action, provide timely feedback, and also facilitate journaling and reflection that was relevant, contextual, and responsive to their immediate experiences. The opportunity to be present with them in the classroom for this extended period of time – and especially since I am not 'in-the-field' with them during their regular teaching practicum placements – is quite a unique opportunity. I believe that this experiential and dialogical approach is highly

effective for fostering reflexivity, which involves not only being critically aware of one's viewpoint, but being able to situate it within relationships of power, discourse, and knowledge.

While this is only one example, the students on this particular trip created an exceptionally positive learning environment built around mutual respect, dedication, and an openness to share and learn, which I think are critical aspects of intercultural learning. It was through this dialogical approach that opportunities to reflect on identity and culture developed, which led to different understandings of culture that also moved beyond tendencies to essentialise others based on stereotypes and generalisations. This final quote exemplifies this important awareness:

"Being from an immigrant family and having underwent the language learning and cultural adaptation process myself, I've always felt in the past that I had intimate and personal knowledge of cross-cultural sensitivities and was able to not succumb to ethnocentric biases both in interpersonal as well as educational relationships.
However my participation in the program ... made me realise that I cannot simply apply assumptions to every situation.

I've found myself falling into a reverse-ethnocentricity, where my own background caused me to assume that I understand the "different" culture entirely, which is as equally untrue and ignorant a mindset as applying the dominant social discourse to all cultures considered the "other"."

For Said (1995), the construction of identity "…involves establishing opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us". Each age and society re-creates its "Others"" (p. 332). The recognition of the ways in which we may construct, interpret, and represent the cultural 'other' is integral to the development of intercultural competency. "The contemporary cultural landscape is an amalgam of cross-cultural influences, blended, patch-worked, and layered upon one another. Unbound and fluid, culture is hybrid and interstitial, moving between spaces of meaning" (Yazdiha, 2010, p. 31). Thus, the understanding of culture and identity as complex, fluid, and evolving must accompany such intercultural learning.

Conclusion – Emergent Questions

As an educator, I will continue to reflect upon and engage with questions of how to unpack with students our understandings of culture and how to cross disciplinary/subject boundaries to foster the development of intercultural competency. The experiences shared throughout this paper will continue to guide my own pedagogical practices and curriculum development, leveraging from the catalytic potential of ISL in teacher education, while being cognizant of the precariousness of such endeavours. This research also indicates the continued need for further research that examines what internationalisation in higher education means with regards to teaching and learning (Estacio & Karis, 2015; Kreber, 2009). Sanderson (2011) argues that "a gap exists in the literature on internationalisation as it applies to teachers in higher education settings, both in terms of their knowledge and skills when working with internationalised curricula and of their personal and professional attitudes" (p. 661).

There is an enduring need for research on the student experience of internationalisation in higher education (Leask, 2010). This includes the ways in which graduate attributes related to the development of international perspectives are fostered and may influence how pre-service teachers interact with other staff and students. However, Caruana (2010) notes that a determining factor for intercultural dialogue in students' learning experiences is an academic's view and understanding of internationalisation. Therefore, future research should address education staff and students' views on internationalisation, and more specifically the development of deeper levels of intercultural competency across teacher education programs. Through this process, staff and students may engage in deeper reflection on the transference of their learning and the development of pedagogical practices to effectively teach in diverse educational settings.

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