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Internationalization of a Faculty SoTL Program: Immersion Experiences of Beijing Professors in a Canadian Research-Intensive University

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Keywords

International faculty exchange, Immersion learning, Scholarship of teaching and learning, Learning communities

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Abstract

This essay describes an international exchange program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) for a cohort of faculty from the Bilingual Training Program (BTP) of the Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education (BTTTCE). The Beijing professors' cohort participated in an adapted version of UBC's Faculty Certificate Program on Teaching and Learning (FCP), which provided them with an immersion experience designed to improve their English language skills and to enhance their understanding of key concepts pertaining to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within and across disciplinary contexts. Critical reflections from both participants' and instructors' perspectives suggest that the program was successful in developing a strong community of learning and intentions for reforming individual teaching practices through engaging in scholarly approaches to and scholarship of teaching and learning. Based on various feedback data and reflection strategies, future iterations of this program will include better integration of language proficiency within the formal SoTL curriculum, as well as provide succession planning for continuing a blended SoTL community among the participants when returning to Beijing.

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Introduction

There is a growing philosophy of globalization in higher education, with ideals of promoting cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation, and responding to global environmental, health, human rights, and other concerns, (e.g., University of British Columbia, 2011). These espoused values are often manifested through efforts to attract

international students and to provide students with study-abroad and international service learning opportunities. Few examples exist of international exchanges for faculty members, although it is likely that faculty would benefit as much as students from the exposure to different cultural environments and the opportunity to examine curricula and pedagogical practices and develop greater cultural sensitivity that international exchanges provide (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). This paper describes a unique faculty exchange: the participation by a cohort of professors from Beijing in a faculty certificate program on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) at the University of British Columbia.

In this essay, we draw insights from Beijing faculty participant experiences, as well as reflections from two program instructors. We describe the context for cross-cultural faculty exchange for Beijing professors into the SoTL program, and reflect upon learning outcomes and the successes and challenges experienced. Implications for cross-cultural faculty exchange programs around SoTL are considered.

Context

The Faculty Certificate Program on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (FCP) was initiated in 1998 at the University of British Columbia (UBC) to assist faculty in developing a more scholarly approach to their teaching and engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning and curriculum practice (Hubball & Burt, 2006; Hubball & Clarke, 2010). The UBC FCP is an 8-month mixed-mode program, with monthly face-to-face sessions and on-line and self-directed learning activities, designed for Canadian and international faculty members. Typical cohorts include 15 to 20 faculty members from across academic ranks and disciplines. The FCP has been completed through distance learning by individual and cohorts of faculty members from the USA, New Zealand, the UK, and the West Indies.

In 2010, an adapted, intensive version of the FCP was developed for the Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education (BTTTCHE) and offered to a cohort of visiting faculty from Beijing. Program personnel included two instructors, several guest teaching scholars, and support staff. The program was entirely delivered in English, and was intended to meet the requirements of the BTTTCHE's Bilingual Training Program (BTP), which prepares faculty to deliver courses in both Mandarin and a foreign language (Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education, 2008; Beijing Higher Education and Culture Centre of Canada, 2009a).

Several inter-related (i.e., cross-national and -institutional) factors led to the implementation of the FCP offering for Beijing professors. First, in the fall of 2009, a departmental collaboration with a visiting Chinese scholar at UBC resulted in a series of invited SoTL presentations in China for faculty members at Beijing Normal University and at Capital Normal University by the UBC FCP program director. Second, as part of a follow-up to these presentations, the External Programs and Learning Technologies unit in the UBC Faculty of Education, which has an extensive collaboration network with international universities, was the key broker in initiating and negotiating terms with the BTTTCHE for the adapted FCP experience for the visiting Beijing professors in the fall of 2010.

This adaptation of the FCP for the Beijing professors provided an immersive experience over a 3-month period, with twice-weekly face-to-face sessions supplemented by a wide variety of academic, social, and cultural events to enrich the cohort experience. These included neighborhood and campus orientations to facilitate settling into pre-arranged accommodations and entry into the program, numerous classroom visits, professional

development seminars and workshops integrated into the program, and field trips to tourist attractions and to other universities. Each member of the cohort was linked with a mentor and a peer reviewer, recruited from FCP alumni, to ensure successful completion of the program (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010). Opportunities were also created for the cohort to attend events hosted by the UBC Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, and to interact with a group of professors emeriti and with the UBC faculty completing the regular 8-month version of the FCP.

The Beijing professors' cohort consisted of 14 faculty members from 11 different municipal universities, colleges, and vocational institutions in Beijing. Most of these are not research-intensive institutions; however, faculty members are expected to conduct research to advance through the academic ranks and to enhance institutional reputation. Members of the cohort were from a variety of disciplines, including business (4), economics (3), art design (2), environmental science (1), computer science (1), mathematics (1), engineering (1), and social work (1). Most were female (12), no more than 35 years old, and married. Eight had children under 6 years old. Dealing with childcare arrangements and being separated from family while abroad added to the emotional stresses experienced during the program.

All members of the Beijing professors' cohort had received Master's degrees. Five had also completed doctoral degrees, and three were completing their doctoral studies. Twelve members of the cohort were lecturers with at least three years of teaching experience, and all were certified as teachers in higher education, having received training in pedagogy, educational psychology, regulations, and ethics in higher education. However, with the elapse of time since this training, most felt new to curricular and pedagogical frameworks and equivalent learning principles and concepts that are embedded within a western context such as Bloom's taxonomy, Kolb's learning styles, criteria for effective teaching, SoTL, and action research methodologies (McKinney, 2007).

English was a second language for all members of the cohort. Some had taught bilingual courses, and all had passed the advanced level of the Business Foreign Language Test. Prior to leaving Beijing, they received two weeks of intensive training to become more proficient in English and cross-cultural communication. However, most had not previously experienced immersion learning abroad and found it challenging to communicate in English.

Cohort Learning Experiences

Because of the immersive nature of the program, a tremendous amount of formal and informal learning occurred within intra- and extra-curricular settings. Examples of formal learning in the FCP were documented in a portfolio, which included the following elements:

1. Record of progress
2. Teaching dossier
3. Weekly reflections on learning
4. Learning-centred course syllabus
5. Action research: peer review of teaching
6. Action research: SoTL research proposal
7. Pedagogical leadership presentations

Faculty participants described three phases of learning during the program: an orientation phase of adjusting to living and working in a new culture, an intermediate phase of

developing a variety of learning communities, and a final phase of embracing the SoTL concepts of the program. As shown in Table 1, program activities supported the progression through these phases. Early learning outcomes reflect understandings of scholarly approaches to teaching in higher education while later learning outcomes reflect uptake of the scholarship of teaching and learning and curriculum practice.

Table 1. Phases of learning during the program

Phase	Program Activities	SoTL Learning Outcomes
1. Cultural Exchange	Neighborhood and campus tours; introduction to FCP instructors, curriculum, and learning portfolio; FCP sessions on principles of adult learning and teaching perspectives.	Effective teaching and learning techniques
2. Development of Learning Community	Field trips; social interactions; classroom visits; participation in campus workshops and events; English language skills development; FCP sessions on learning communities, classroom assessment techniques, and cooperative learning.	Learning communities; cooperative learning; peer review of teaching
3. SoTL Engagement	Portfolio reviews and feedback; FCP sessions on instructional technology, outcomes-based curricular design, and action research.	Learning-centred course design; assessment of learning; curriculum change; research methodologies

Throughout the program, faculty participants were encouraged to record their experiences, think about them holistically, and critically reflect on implications for their own teaching practices. The portfolios they produced demonstrated deep engagement in the program, and a commitment to reforming their teaching practices by adopting more learning-centred teaching and assessment methods and engaging in action research to evaluate their efforts. In particular, many had plans to expand their use of small group and cooperative learning activities and authentic assessment strategies.

Excerpts from one of the weekly reflections of a participant demonstrate the holistic nature of the learning that took place during the program:

I attended the launch event for "UBC Thrive" [a series of events focused on wellness (University of British Columbia, 2010)] and attended four free films on campus, two of which focused on suicide and showed that pressure and isolation are main factors...In the FCP, we learned how to write a research proposal, and had two guest speakers who talked about collaborative learning, teaching portfolios, and SoTL... In the logistics and supply chain course, we had a case study on Chinese home appliance companies, and in the marketing research course we had guest speakers who introduced their marketing research company and had a lab on SPSS's descriptive statistics...When I reckoned on all of these, I found that no matter who the person or what the company, we live in connection with others...I appreciate the theme of this week. It makes me think a lot, not only about the mental health of people, the environment, and society, but also about the health of education...In my own teaching practice, I'll advocate at my university for the construction of a more open and diversified learning environment to help the learners build their connections to the world. In my classroom, I will pay more attention to isolated

individuals, and try to help them build connections to other students and to the learning environment.

Successes and Challenges

There was reasonable alignment between the objectives of the FCP and those of the BTP, although the match was not perfect. A primary intention of the BTP is to improve foreign language skills and to provide an international disciplinary perspective so that participants are able to deliver bilingual versions of their courses (Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education, 2008; Beijing Higher Education and Culture Centre of Canada, 2009a). However, language training is neither the focus of the FCP, nor within the expertise of the instructors. Similarly, the FCP does not emphasize discipline-specific practices at the exclusion of multidisciplinary teaching and learning research and practices. These gaps were initially frustrating to the cohort, exemplified in the early formative and later summative program feedback surveys:

Initially, we were all a little concerned about the lack of formal language instruction; however, as time progressed, we could see how our language development was being integrated in the cohort discussions and program assignments (reading, writing and presenting our SoTL work)...I really wanted to improve my English speaking skills but this program has more emphasis on the research and practices of university teaching...We learned so much from the interactions in class and with the professors and the UBC mentors...Outside of cohort meetings, it was too easy to speak with each other in Chinese.

Nevertheless, the program did provide the immersion experience of living in an English-speaking community and receiving education delivered in English, and when it became apparent that the cohort members were eager to connect with UBC faculty and visit classes in their discipline, FCP staff assisted with on-site classroom visit arrangements. More fittingly, the BTP has a stated goal of "introducing Canadian higher education pedagogy and curriculum to China" (Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education, 2008; Beijing Higher Education and Culture Centre of Canada, 2009b), which aligns very well with the FCP focus on learning-centred pedagogy and curriculum design in higher education (Hubball & Burt, 2010).

True to its own ideals, the FCP is itself designed in a learning-centred manner, responding to learners' expressed needs and circumstances while ensuring that stated outcomes of the program are met (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010). For example, it quickly became obvious that the cohort was interested in improving their English language skills, so the program was adjusted by incorporating small group discussions and multiple oral SoTL presentations into each session so that all could practice speaking in English. By using a recognized rubric for providing feedback and self-assessment of English as a second language proficiency, one instructor took individual cohort members out of the classroom on a rotational basis for one-on-one reading, writing, and conversational engagement, while the other instructor took over the management of the cohort sessions. Individual discussions still focused on SoTL literature and concepts, but provided a unique opportunity to assist cohort members with their English language proficiency while reinforcing learning-centred concepts of self-assessment. The cohort was also advised to practice their English outside the confines of the FCP sessions by finding three to five opportunities daily for questioning and conversational skills in everyday living through talking with people they met, such as bus drivers, students, professors, store clerks, and passersby. Some also participated in English language classes available at UBC on their own. Further, to assist with written English, FCP

mentors were directed to give feedback on language (in addition to content) in the portfolio assignments.

For most sessions, there were assigned pre-readings from the SoTL literature. However, with the short time between sessions and the cohort's limited English proficiency and inexperience in SoTL, these reading assignments proved more time consuming and challenging than anticipated. In addition, given the cultural learning style of the cohort (with reliance on didactic professor input and collective attention to lectures rather than emphasis on western style self-directed learning experiences), there was some initial uncertainty for taking responsibility to critique and express alternative perspectives pertaining to complex SoTL issues. The instructors responded to some of these concerns by limiting the readings to those items that were essential, with additional options suggested for those who were interested, and providing detailed guidelines and deadlines for the portfolio assignments. Portfolios were formally reviewed by the instructors on three occasions during the program to ensure appropriate progress was being made. Also, as the program proceeded, the cohort adjusted their engagement approach to learning and made enormous efforts to become more autonomous and participatory learners, as Kennedy (2002) predicts. The following remarks capture key reflections from the program instructors at the mid and final stages of the 3-month immersion program:

The dedication and accomplishments of the Beijing professors has been remarkable. Both of us and the mentor colleagues could not imagine being able to go to Beijing and learn about Chinese perspectives of SoTL in the Chinese language, and be able to teach our own courses in Chinese when returning to Vancouver. The growth in language skills and confidence of each individual to be able to communicate effectively in written and oral English about complex SoTL concepts within their discipline was quite remarkable. Further, the work ethic of the Beijing professors was very striking to be able to complete their high quality SoTL graduation portfolios.

The cohort was very cohesive and mutually supportive during the program, developing an effective learning community in which encouragement and constructive feedback were provided. The functioning of this community was facilitated by a number of factors, including the frequency of the FCP sessions, the pairing of participants for classroom visits and the mixing of the pairs, the inclusion of social events and sight-seeing tours in the program, and living in close proximity to each other in their off-campus accommodations. This intra-cohort learning community intersected with other learning communities, including the current UBC participants in and alumni of the FCP, the broader community of students, faculty, and professors emeriti at UBC, and other cohorts in the BTP, as illustrated in Figure 1. There is also potential for the members of the cohort to assist in the creation of SoTL learning communities in their home institutions in Beijing and to participate in the international community engaged in SoTL, which is embedded to varying extent in higher education institutions the world over.

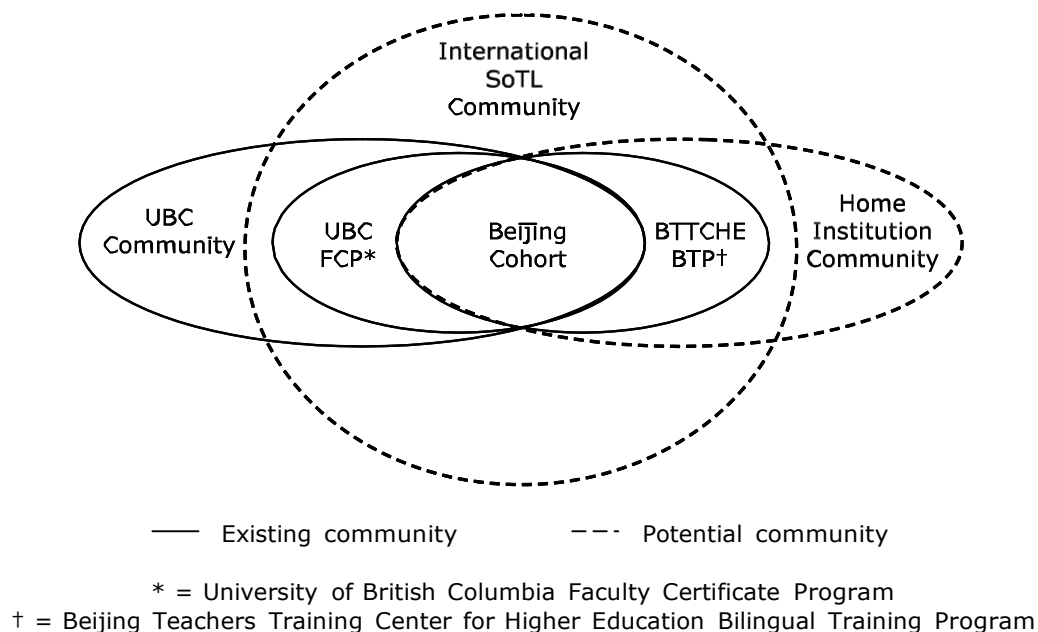


Figure 1. Intersecting learning communities for the Beijing cohort

Cohort members left the program eager to reform their teaching practices and, having worked very hard to prepare proposals for SoTL projects, some wanted to pursue the research they designed. Such transfer of theory to practice would be facilitated if the learning community remained intact. While the instructors encouraged the group to articulate feasible ways they could stay in touch and continue to support each other, only time will tell whether this occurs in practice; however, the group did make plans to meet two months after returning to Beijing. Barriers include the complex realities of faculty members working at different institutions dispersed throughout metropolitan Beijing and in different disciplines. They have also left the immersive environment of the program, and returned to busy lives with families and friends and the demands of their academic work.

The significant success of the program (as already documented) in achieving its objectives is further evident by the evaluation and continuation plans by the respective organizations at UBC and Beijing to commence the next cohort in September 2011. For example, the ongoing methods of site visits, review of participant portfolio assignments, and interviews between various stakeholders (that were not directly involved in program design and delivery) including Beijing program participants, a visiting Chinese scholar, and representatives from the BTTCHE were used to gauge whether or not the program was effective in meeting the needs and circumstances of its client group. It was widely recognized that the program was very effective and worthy of its investment both for the Beijing organization and for UBC's international reputation to continue with this collaboration. It was also acknowledged that every inaugural program, in particular, can be enhanced with attention to suggestions for improvement.

Future iterations of this program will integrate a strategic language skills component as part of the SoTL FCP (e.g., extended use of the readings, classroom SoTL presentations, and effective communications including written work). Further, the program will more effectively facilitate disciplinary-specific interactions with UBC faculty through the use of the campus-wide faculty mentoring network to enhance curricula and pedagogical practices.

Cultural differences, such as differing expectations for classroom engagement, will be recognized earlier and dealt with more explicitly, with both instructors and participants needing to double-check meanings and seek clarification to reach mutual understandings. For example, anonymous formative feedback every month from cohort participants will be drawn upon to guide further adaptations to ensure that participants become more and more familiar (and comfortable) with the interactive learning environment. Further, it is recommended that an initial video conference meeting should take place prior to the start of the program, while participants are still in Beijing, in order to better assist with an orientation and introductions, respond to questions, clarify expectations, and create a welcoming atmosphere for the Beijing professors with the FCP instructional team. Finally, succession plans will be developed in the final month of the 3-month intensive program in order to facilitate a blended (face-to-face and distance) SoTL community among the returning Beijing participants and instructional team.

Conclusion

Data from formative and summative program feedback, responding to quantitative and qualitative measures about the participants' perceptions of the quality of learning, teaching and overall program experiences suggest that this international faculty exchange program, the first such opportunity for faculty members in the Bilingual Training Program of the Beijing Teachers Training Center for Higher Education to participate in the Faculty Certificate Program on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at the University of British Columbia, was successful in meeting its two main objectives, namely improved English language proficiency and enhanced understandings of Canadian perspectives of SoTL practices within and across the disciplines. As part of this reflective paper, a number of program strengths have been identified, as well as key improvements and further adaptations to better meet the needs and circumstances for the next cohort. In the spirit of SoTL, the process of reflection, strategic course evaluation, and scholarship by program participants and the instructional team will contribute to the enhanced learning and the quality of further program offerings.

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