
East meets West: The Role and Value of Inter-Cultural Competence in a Short-Term Academic Exchange Program

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Abstract

In October, 2014, eleven Masters students and one professor from the University of Puerto Rico Graduate School of Planning visited Feng-Chia University, located in Taichung, Taiwan, to participate in a week long academic and cultural exchange program. Both Taiwanese and Puerto Rican students actively participated in a curriculum centered on three urban intervention projects located in Taichung.

We will explore how cultural disequilibrium affects students' ability to work together in an assigned Planning project. There were two key parallel learning processes: one centered on bridging the culture gap and another on sharing knowledge and applying tools to solve a planning problem. Changes in visions, values and practices that transcended the duration of the academic exercise in Taiwan were also studied.

We conducted two focus groups with participating Puerto Rican and Taiwanese students, to describe learning processes and overall cultural experiences during the short-term exchange program. Findings show that both hosting and visiting students were able to benefit from the learning experience, although in different ways. Taiwanese students strengthened their leadership and language skills, while Puerto Rican students gained insight that allowed them to view urban problems and processes differently. Both groups gained competency as intercultural communicators, as evidenced by the ways they faced communication challenges, their capacity to overcome them, and an increased sensitivity, acceptance and respect of cultural differences. [Keywords: Exchange Programs, Inter-Cultural Competence, Inter-Cultural Communication, Inter-Cultural Encounter, Study Abroad].

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1.0 Introduction

In the field of planning, awareness of cultural context is paramount. Practice is molded in part by a rich historical tradition traditionally centered on Western values. Planning students in American universities become familiar with a planning theory generally rooted in a western tradition. In contrast, the Taiwanese curriculum combines the content of both the western and eastern tradition, demonstrating a planning paradigm of compromise and modulation.

Various regions of the Asian continent continue to experience rapid urban development. Urbanization patterns and planning innovation occur simultaneously at a rapid pace. Planning in Puerto Rico is currently facing challenges of a different nature. Growth and development models have been questioned for some time now, and the previously held idea that economic growth is synonymous with construction has been discarded by many due to a stagnant economy and an increasing awareness of the importance of fostering sustainable cities in the face of climate change and dwindling resources.

Context on both sides of the globe permeates how we frame and attempt to solve planning problems. What would happen if we were to examine planning problems in a radically different context? Would such an experience have an impact on our capacity to examine problems and propose solutions? Inter-country academic exchange programs expose students to examining urban problems considering diverse perspectives. Thinking and analysis is hopefully transformed to include more world-centric paradigms.

Institutions of higher education are reassessing their mission and responsibilities, showing increasing concern for preparing graduates to become global citizens and professionals. The internationalization of higher education can take various forms: student-faculty exchanges, internships in another country, globalized curricula in the home campus, foreign language education, cultural studies, international education programs, and offshore campuses (Jackson 2006). The Taiwan Puerto Rico exchange program is one where the main focus was a one-week visit to the host country where students participated in an intensive one-week workshop. Our interest was to evaluate the program and understand the benefits provided to both visiting and hosting participants.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 International Students/Study Abroad

Students from different cultures, international or domestic, are culture carriers who bring diverse ideas, values, experiences and

behaviors to the learning environment. (Kimmel & Volet 2012). One motivation for increasing the number of international academic exchanges is the assumption that students can serve both as cultural carriers and resources (Sawir 2013; Colvin, Volet, & Fozdar 2014), and as links between cultures (Paige 1990). Students carry their own cultural capital to campus (Denson & Bowman 2013). Interaction with culturally diverse peers can also enhance the educational experience of the student population and foster positive learning outcomes. The underlying idea is that exposure to and integration with different perspectives can create more critically engaged, inter culturally competent, globally aware graduates, who possess the tools required to successfully “negotiate the richness of a world miniaturized by globalization” (Sexton, 2012).

The expanding participation of students in study abroad programs is regarded as integral to the process of internationalizing the higher education curriculum as a response to globalization. Study abroad carries the simple notion that active engagement with other people in new environments is an enriching learning experience. Students are: 1) exposed to the habits, lifestyle, customs, social norms of the host culture, 2) familiarized with the host academic culture of their host university, 3) challenged to adapt their behaviors and values in response to socio-cultural situations in the host culture, and 4) stimulated to expand their capabilities for cross-cultural communication and intercultural understanding (as cited in Yang 2011).

Cheng (2014) explored the perceived value of short-term study abroad programs. The list included broadening one’s horizons, providing great opportunities to travel, personal growth, learning about the culture of the host country, enhance proficiency in the host country’s language, improving one’s CV, strengthening one’s independence, making local friends in the host country and international friends from other countries, building closer relationships with the students from one’s institution, learning about new perspectives from one’s own country, enhancing one’s view of national identity, and increasing one’s awareness of globalization. Personal development was seen as most beneficial, while academic and professional enhancement was less valued. A study at Oregon State found that 97% of study abroad participants reported that their experience was worth the cost with the largest benefits being broadening their cultural perspective, enriching their personal life, and enriching their academic experience (as cited in Lumkes, Hallet and Vallade 2012).

Lumkes et al (2012) found that the most important contribution of the study abroad portion of the course examined was expressed in the

students' cultural sensitivity and personal development rather than in discipline-specific information adequately taught in class. The author concludes that the particular discipline studied on study abroad courses may not be overriding. The most important outcomes delivered by the study abroad portion of the course were the students' understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

We will examine a particular case of the study abroad program: a short-term experience based on collaborative teams working toward the goal of developing urban intervention alternatives. We are considering study abroad students working on a collaborative task with a group of local hosting students. Motivated by the desires to become effective players in an intercultural team setting and to produce quality work, the students would attempt to communicate with other team members on how to tackle the problem/project at hand. The process of communication and problem solving would be smooth only if the students are conscious of the behavioral and communicative style and perspectives of teammates, some proficiency in the local language, a capacity to generate collaborative skills, and self-confidence in functioning in the multicultural team. The teamwork serves as a bridge between goals and outcomes of the study abroad experience in all three dimensions: intercultural, disciplinary/career and personal development dimensions (Yang 2011).

2.2 The Role of Intercultural Competence, Contact and Sensitivity in Study Abroad Programs

Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) have indicated that cultural competence will have a positive impact on the overall development of cross-cultural sensitivity and increase the degree of acceptance of and adaptation to cultural differences. Empathy and being a good listener were identified as positive traits of Intercultural Communication Competence, while not listening and lack of eye contact were negative traits. Some of the necessary qualities of competent intercultural communicators include sensitivity, kindness, having experience with other cultures, as well as wanting to learn about cultural matters and being good at these processes. (Arasaratnam and Doerfel 2005).

Motivations for intercultural contact include its perceived utility, a shared future (the prospect of sharing common future experiences with students perceived to be culturally different), a concern for others (wellbeing of international students), interest and curiosity (Dunne 2013). Colvin and Volet (2014) examined key dimensions of positive intercultural interactions. He identified the following: agency, or the

intentional influencing of “one’s functioning and life circumstance”, cultural interest, duration, context (i.e., cultural profile of the student body), affect (emotion) and self-disclosure (process of revealing personal information about oneself to another (Chen and Nakazawa 2009).

Students who acquired a higher level of inter-cultural sensitivity went beyond superficial observations of differences in the host culture, displaying more empathy for others. They displayed more awareness of gaps in their intercultural communicative competence and knowledge of the host culture. Those with an ethnocentric mindset, however, had less appreciation of the complexity of cultural differences and sometimes were unaware that their style of communication might be hindering cross-cultural relationship-building (Jackson 2006).

3.0 Workshop Structure Description

Puerto Rican students traveled to Taiwan to participate in this collaborative urban planning workshop. During the first working day of the exchange program, participants met and discussed a detailed plan for the week. The Taiwan team had previously selected the following interventions: the development of a new archaeological site in the city of Taichung, restoring the area adjacent to an urban stream, and transforming a new city park to include an additional stop for the Taichung subway, under construction at the time this paper was written.

On the first formal day of the workshop, participating students boarded a bus for a tour of the city. The tour included major urban landmarks of the city of Taichung, including the new city center, the green corridor, and *Rainbow Park*. They also visited one of the most important temples in the region, becoming more familiar with local Buddhist and Taoist religious rituals. The one-day tour ended at dusk in the *Gaomei* wetlands, a successful example of wetland conservation, used for recreational activities.

Each study site was visited during the second day of the workshop. The third and fourth days, students worked together on the development of the proposed interventions for each site. On the fifth day, the students presented a video and one or two posters on each of the three proposed interventions. Project products were of excellent quality and are evidence of the depth of analysis demonstrated by students in a relatively short period of time.

4.0 Methods

To evaluate students’ participation and experience during the study abroad program, we decided to plan for and conduct two focus groups,

each with the same question guide, at each student's respective college campus. Both groups were facilitated by the professors who participated in the exchange program, in their native language, Mandarin Chinese or Spanish. Each group had a similar number of participants, seven on the Feng-Chia side and six on the UPR side. Group discussions were then transcribed in each group's native language and translated into English for analysis.

The focus group question guide, based on the professors' experience with the exchange program and a literature review, included the following topics:

- Motivation for participation
- Previous travel experience
- Attitudes and impressions about cultural differences, and how these may have changed after the exchange program
- Challenges encountered when conducting the assigned work
- Verbal and non-verbal communication challenges
- Structure of the exchange program and its impact in transcending cultural barriers
- Changes in daily practices, ideas, or values as a result of the trip
- Skills acquired or developed as a result of program participation
- Changes in views on planning studies as an outcome of the exchange program.

5.0 Findings

Two focus groups were conducted approximately six months after the end of the short-term exchange program. Professors Liu and Santiago coordinated each group. Student participation consisted of seven students from Feng-Chia University and six students from the University of Puerto Rico. We have divided findings according to the themes previously mentioned in the methodology.

5.1 Motivation for Participation and Previous Travel Experience

All Taiwanese respondents indicated either interacting with or making friends with foreign students as a motivation for participation. Five students mentioned making friends and two indicated interacting with foreign students. In contrast, half of all Puerto Rican students indicated participating to experience a different culture. Two of the

students indicated participating because the trip was organized as a course, and the perception of planning problems in a different context was of interest to them.

Previous travel experience may be an indicator of motivation for participation; students may want to travel for the first time or repeat previous positive travel experiences. Four of the Taiwanese participants in the focus group indicated having previous travel experience to places like Canada, Thailand and the USA, while the remaining three participants did not have travel experiences outside Taiwan. All Puerto Rican students had previous travel experience, all visiting US states. Half of them travelled previously for academic reasons, but none of the students had previously visited Asia.

5.2 Cultural Differences

One factor mentioned by three Puerto Rican students was the order and organization observed in everyday life. The most common examples were how stairs were used, entering and exiting the trains. Another salient observation was the upkeep and maintenance of common areas even when no trashcans were present, due to what was perceived as a sense of ownership of common areas. Student said they saw other solutions to common problems like trash collection.

“And everything was clean, so that was like...it really did make me think that here in Puerto Rico ... if we want it to be clean, well then, you have to put trash cans...it’s the mentality, but (in Taiwan) there are no trash cans and it’s clean”.

When discussing social relationships, four Taiwanese students mentioned that Puerto Rican students were friendly, open-minded and hospitable, noticed differences in the way they make friends (one indicated they were enthusiastic about making friends). Puerto Rican students frequently mentioned the hospitality shown by the Taiwanese hosts, both by students and faculty.

Another topic discussed by two Taiwanese students was work relationships. One student indicated that when the group had questions, they would discuss them immediately. Another student mentioned the capacity to coordinate well without fighting or quarrelling. In terms of process, students indicated that it was easier to accept viewpoints from each side once they were acquainted with each other.

Work ethic was also mentioned by two of the Taiwanese students. They indicated Puerto Rican students were conscientious and serious about their work, and that Puerto Rican students taught him “passion and insistence”.

Non-verbal communication was mentioned by only two of the Taiwanese students, one of which had previous travel experience in the US and Canada. He mentioned “I thought Puerto Rico students would give me a very big hug the first time we met each other”. This was an interesting observation since Puerto Rican students were instructed by their professor not to hug students when they met the first time, since there are different customs regarding appropriate greetings in an Asian country, where hugs may not be so common. A second student mentioned that the Puerto Rican students did not conceal their feelings.

Recalling differences in drinking habits, one student mentioned that Puerto Rican students would drink beer or wine when strolling around the streets, uncommon in Taiwan. Puerto Rican students, on the other hand, noticed that the use of alcohol was less prevalent among Taiwanese students. This was evident when they socialized in the Night Market area, which is the equivalent to their Collegetown.

One last topic mentioned by two of the Taiwanese students was transportation. One mentioned that Puerto Rican students did not like walking, and another mentioned their interest in motorcycles. It is worth noting that the motorcycle is a common means of transportation for Taiwanese students, but not for Puerto Rican students.

5.3 Work Related Challenges and Solutions

Every student in the Taiwanese focus group mentioned that communication, specifically oral communication, was the main challenge encountered during the exchange program. One student indicated certain cognitive and cultural differences as a main challenge. The example provided was what is considered as good environmental performance within the context of a river studied by the group. Different notions of what is a river were expressed, and also different viewpoints on the scale of pollution problems.

Puerto Rican students also identified communication as the main challenge of the exchange program. Each group would initially speak in their native language and discuss problems at length. When they had to communicate the results of their discussion in English, they would provide each other a summary of the discussion. On the one hand, Puerto Rican students felt that valuable information and opinions were lost in the process. On the other hand, students were forced to simplify their ideas and this was seen as an advantage. Communication difficulties were also seen as an exercise that would help students communicate with people of different technical competence, level of schooling, etc.

“I associate the job of simplifying things to have a better communication with this culture with our role as planners where to sometimes communicate a message to a community here in Puerto Rico...you have to simplify things to get a message across because perhaps they don’t have the same technical knowledge that I have and I saw this experience as a practice for that (kind of situation).” Another challenge for Puerto Rican students was the use of computer programs with a Mandarin Chinese user interface.

Some of the solutions provided by Taiwanese students included the use of gestures, and other non-verbal communication, including pictures and graphs, and the use of an on-line dictionary. One student also mentioned the importance of expressing oneself and being brave when confronting a challenge. Attitude (eagerness to understand) and listening carefully were also mentioned as necessary components to overcoming communication barriers. Other students indicated that some enthusiastic members of each group were critical in bridging the communication gap, yet one student mentioned that failure in communication made her feel embarrassed and, as a result, she would walk away.

Puerto Rican students indicated solving communication problems mainly by the use of drawings, looking for interpreters who would facilitate communication between groups because of their language skills, and through the use of gestures. The role of technology was also highlighted; maps and Google Translate have changed the way communication problems are approached.

5.4 Structure of the Exchange Program

When asked to comment on the structure of the workshop, all Taiwanese students expressed their comments in very positive terms. There were no negative or critical comments. Students described working together using words such as “smoothly, happily, nicely” and “with enthusiasm”. Two mentioned Puerto Rican students were able to express an interest and consider Taiwanese viewpoints in a sincere manner, and demonstrated a willingness to understand their ideas. One of them mentioned his effective leadership role. Some Puerto Rican students reinforced this last point, indicating that leadership of certain individuals was a key element to the success of the program.

Puerto Rican students thought it was an excellent idea to participate in a city tour with the Taiwanese students during the first day. The tour allowed students to meet each other in an informal atmosphere and work as a group. Sakurai, McCall-Wolf and Kashima (2010) described a similar multicultural intervention program called

“bus excursion”, carried out at the beginning of the academic year. The students (local and international) and a supervisor rode on a bus to a popular tourist spot. Students got to know one another in a relaxed atmosphere. Because they sat randomly on the bus, they were likely to meet with people from countries different than their own. The bus excursion might have triggered more cognitive and attitudinal changes in participants, such as interests in new experiences and self-efficacy in forming local ties. International students who participated in the “bus excursion” program, tended to develop a greater number of friends overall, including locals, over a period of 3 months. Comments on the tour bus experience undertaken during the first day of our short-term program seem to result in similar attitudinal changes.

Puerto Rican participants pointed to certain areas of opportunity. A student indicated that the division into three groups was beneficial because it allowed more interaction, but it would have been nice to have a more balanced number of participants per group on both sides. Several also wished that the exchange program could take place during a longer time period, such as the summer.

5.5 Changes in Practices, Ideas and Values

A common theme on the Taiwanese side was language proficiency. Three of the students expressed an interest in improving their proficiency in the English language. Two mentioned an interest in participating in cultural interactions, and experiencing foreign cultures, and another group mentioned a particular interest for visiting and learning more from Puerto Rico, and one mentioned specifically Salsa music.

As hosts, one half of the Taiwanese students highlighted an increased social capacity and confidence, particularly when entertaining foreign friends. Only one student mentioned an improvement in skills required for poster design.

When asked if the exchange program had an effect on how they viewed their studies or the planning profession, there was consensus that their viewpoints remained the same. Two Taiwanese mentioned Puerto Rican students’ strong work ethic, and another indicated learning a lot from them, and their ability to enjoy life. Still another described Puerto Rican students as more open-minded.

One of the Puerto Rican students indicated “I learned to love the city when I undertook this trip”. After studying a city (Taichung) in a different context, he came back with a renewed interest in getting to know cities in Puerto Rico.

There was also a marked interest in accessibility and the importance of public transport, and examining group behavior in public settings.

For instance, they observed the behavior of Taiwanese residents in public escalators and train stations, and this made them more curious about behavior of Puerto Rican residents in similar public settings.

Students also mentioned that the education received at the University of Puerto Rico was of high quality and transferable to other contexts. They saw this experience as one that reinforced the importance of interacting with students from other disciplines. One area of opportunity is that the Graduate School of Planning can provide a better technical preparation through the use of programs such as *Autocad* and *Sketchup*. One specific recommendation was to integrate more technology into course curricula and to use broader benchmarking examples, considering examples outside the US. The experience also motivated some to explore opportunities for educational degrees elsewhere.

They also reported an increased sensitivity towards discriminatory comments and behavior associated with ethnic or racial groups in Puerto Rico. There was also a consensus on the need to reduce bureaucracy to solve urban problems more effectively.

6.0 Conclusions

Both groups of students were able to benefit from the learning experience, although in different ways. Both gained competency as intercultural communicators, as evidenced by the ways they faced communication challenges, their capacity to overcome them, and the increased sensitivity, acceptance and respect of cultural differences. One of the immediate advantages to inter-cultural communication is the development of cross-cultural sensitivity and a greater degree of acceptance of and adaptation to cultural differences (Anderson et al. 2006).

In terms of relationships, the emphasis on the host side was on cultivating friendships and maintaining a harmonious relationship among group members. Such findings are consistent with a worldview, prevalent in East Asian cultures such as Japan, China and Korea, where harmony and relationality are highly valued (as cited in Holmes and O'Neill 2012). Visiting students expressed being participants in a harmonious work environment where they were often overwhelmed by the hospitality they experienced during their visit.

Both groups' greatest work-related challenge was communication. Usually, participants would discuss issues at length in their respective native language, and then relay a summary of that discussion to the other group in English. Participants on the Puerto Rican side were concerned that there was richness in those discussions that were "lost

in translation". On the Taiwan side, there was concern for studying a planning problem with unequal cognitive and cultural backgrounds. Both groups indicated that challenges were effectively met with the use of non-verbal communication, mainly gestures, and the use of drawings, graphs, and translation technology. The simplification of ideas that resulted from the loss in translation was also seen as a transferable skill that would help students communicate with groups of diverse backgrounds or skill levels.

Both groups identified effective student leadership as key to the success of the exchange program. Key individuals facilitated communication and coordinated tasks efficiently among visiting and host students. A second component identified by visiting students as key to the program's success was the one-day bus city tour. Host and visiting students were able to meet each other during the first day of the program in a relaxed setting, facilitating communication and effective team building during the remaining days of the exchange program.

On the planning disciplinary side, some salient findings of the impact of this exchange program for Puerto Rican students is an increased interest in the city and its processes and functions. The experience of seeing and living in a radically different urban environment made students notice not only physical but also organizational and cultural solutions to problems. Some students now notice or are increasingly sensitive to city processes and functions that may have been previously invisible. Some examples included queuing procedures to enter the train, procedures when entering and using escalators, and alternative procedures for trash collection and disposal.

Taiwanese students, as hosts, were able to benefit from the experience in different ways, mainly through the practice of language and leadership skills. They were able to assert themselves through leadership roles while they practiced speaking and writing English, which was a second language for all participants.

The Taiwan-Puerto Rico exchange program provided both short and long-term benefits to visiting and host students in a brief time period. The duration is a factor that may make this type of program accessible to students with a constrained budget and those with work responsibilities and families, where a summer program is generally not an option. Furthermore, participating students indicated acquiring valuable skills during the exchange program that could be transferable to other work settings. Academic Planning programs should be encouraged to develop educational exchange programs such as this one, where students not only to acquired valuable skills but also were

able to return to their host location applying different lenses to examine urban problems and processes.

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