The Experience of Students Who Attended the UDRU – SMSU Development Program in Minnesota (United States)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the experience of a contingent of Thai PhD in Education students who travelled to the United States (US) to participate in an intensive credit bearing academic development program at Southwest Minnesota State University. The students from Udon Thani Rajabhat University (UDRU) in the northeast region of the Kingdom of Thailand attended the program in October/November 2011. At the time of their visit, they were in the first year of their PhD program which is conducted in the Thai language. The UDRU contingent comprised two groups who are following different PhD specialisations in the fields of educational administration and curriculum development. Each group attended its own program, designed and taught by senior faculty members at SMSU.

These annual programs are part of an on-going Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU)—Udon Thani Rajabhat University (UDRU) Cooperative Project that was initiated in 2007. Since then, four groups of students have benefited from the program.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Faculty of Science and Technology, Kasem Bundit University, Bangkok.

Keywords: Experience, Southwest Minnesota State University, Udon Thani Rajabhat University

1. Introduction

The number of higher education students studying outside of their country of residence continues to rise, and the variety of study opportunities to meet different needs steadily widens. Literatures draw attention mainly to three types of international study. First, international students travel abroad to register for a degree program lasting a year or more. Second, studying abroad programs are taken by large numbers of younger undergraduate or junior graduate students from North America and Europe. Third, short stand-alone programs are designed

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mainly for professionals seeking to up-skill in response to new technical or theoretical developments relevant to their practice.

There are also many atypical international study programs that are not based on the profit motive, that are small in scale, that emerge as a result of close collegial links or allegiances between the institutions involved, and where the parties recognize that their collaboration generates a development dividend. This report focuses on such a three-week-long credit bearing program in which PhD students from a poor rural region in a middle-income country experience the benefits of studying at a university in the agricultural heartland of one of the world’s major economic powers.

The aims of the program are: to deepen theoretical mastery of a selected theme from students fields of PhD study; to expand their analytical skills; to facilitate their proficiency levels in English; and to expose the group to the United States schooling system through a series of school visits.

Each version of the program has involved a combination of activities including: close study of a core text, evaluative analysis of the arguments put forward by the authors, and deliberation on the implications of the text for students’ own context. Time is allocated for students to prepare through self-study and group study for formal learning-teaching sessions. Visits to local schools are an important element in the program for juxtaposing theory and with examples of practice in US schools. An open mode of interaction is adopted to encourage students to freely express their own interpretations and views in round-table discussion sessions, while time is also scheduled for them to make presentations in a seminar format. The SMSU hosts also manage to squeeze in free time for their Thai guests, several of whom are travelling outside of their home country for the first time, to savour being immersed in the environments of a US mid-west small town.

Before departure to the US, the student groups were engaged in preparatory work, including reading and holding introductory seminars on the key texts for their respective programs. In 2011, these were Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) on ‘effective school leadership’ for the education administration group and Gregory & Parry (2006) on ‘brain compatible learning’ for the curriculum group. Other preparation in 2011 included: English language tutorials, and briefing meetings by PhD students who attended the program the previous year.

The aim of this study

The partner institutions are naturally interested in the impact and value of the program for participating students. They plan to conduct a comprehensive study that combines close observation of all aspects of the program, together with student diaries, instructor’s post-class notes, participant observation materials by Thai academics who accompany the students as advisors, and pre- and post- program interviews and questionnaires in Thailand.

In order to support the design of a comprehensive, a project such as envisaged in the paragraph above, was decided to first conduct an exploratory study. The main function of this exploratory study would be to inform the focus of a later comprehensive project by confirming issues for investigation that had been identified a priori, and crucially to pinpoint other issues and questions for further investigation. It was further expected that this exploratory study would, in its own right, bring to light some valuable insights.

Thus, the aim for this exploratory study is to explore student experiences and responses with regard to: their preparation prior to departure, their language skills in the light of the obligation to use English in the program, the value of their newly acquired experience and skills, and whether they as education professionals could see a way to apply what they had learned in Thailand.

A small team of four collaborated on this study. At UDRU, two instructors familiar with both student groups and who participated in coaching the groups prior to departure were tasked to conduct focus group interviews with the students upon their return. At SMSU, two instructors who are designers and facilitators of the program undertook to make notes after each class based on the aims set out above.
2. Methodology

*Focus group interviews*

Separate focus group interviews were arranged in December 2011 for the Administration group and the Curriculum group. The interviews were attended by 12 and 9 participants respectively while 13 did not attend. In each case, all participants participated in the discussion and stayed to the end of their interview of over 90 minutes. In the week previous to the interviews, each class was requested to participate, with no obligation to attend. All voluntary participants signed a consent form containing confidentiality and information security clauses.

The focus group interviews were arranged by the two Thailand based members of the research team, one of whom facilitated the meeting based on a semi-structured interview with nine questions. Both interviewers made notes and asked follow-up questions. A third person was also present for the first focus group to take notes. The discussion was almost entirely held in Thai because only two students were elected to speak in English. The Thai meeting facilitator paraphrased all discussion in English for the benefit of the second English speaking researcher who has rudimentary Thai skills. Consequently, all text in this report that is enclosed in single inverted commas (e.g. ‘teachers and…’) is an English paraphrase of the spoken words of a participant in Thai. Where double inverted commas appear, they refer to the spoken words of a participant in English.

3. PhD student participants

The PhD student groups consist mainly of professionals, full-time employed in the Thai public and private school system as: senior teachers up to the level of Director (School Principals); senior managers responsible for administrative units such as districts; and also managers of curriculum and other education functions and services. Other PhD candidates have included: private school owners/managers, university teachers and heads of departments, and private sector enterprise personnel in the services sector. More recently, student groups have also included senior education ministry officials from the Laos Peoples Democratic Republic. The gender balance in the classes is roughly equitable.

Students are registered part time and travel from various towns in Udon Thani province (and from Vientiane, the capital of Laos about 100km. away) to UDRU for weekend lectures and contact with teaching staff and their supervisors. The majority of the students conduct their PhD studies through the medium of the Thai language with English as a second language.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Expectations

In almost any form of evaluation of a learning program, there is value in finding out what expectations the students hold. This gives insight into their motivations for learning and the kind of criteria they would use to measure the success of a program.

It does not seem feasible to expect the instructors at SMSU to address the various personal expectations of every visiting PhD student on the program. However, the following exercise may be considered useful for both UDRU students and SMSU teachers—Every student participant writes a three hundred word summary of their own particular teaching background and curriculum interests as background information for the interest of the instructors at SMSU, to be taken into account where possible. A further benefit of such an exercise would be to encourage students to begin clarifying their own aims by putting them down on paper.
4.2 Realizations

The discussion that follows refers to the realizations experienced by participants during the course of their program. Though the focus group questions referred to ‘what did you learn from being on the program?’ responses of the students sometimes reflected profound moments of insight, awareness and understanding; for example, one participant referred to a ‘...greater awareness of what (my) role as an administrator can be in Thailand’, one had the impression that for him, this was not simply a matter of learning some facts about the duties of administrators. It was a realization of potential, of what he could be, or of what he might achieve.

The student realizations discussed above provide plentiful evidence that, through linking theory to practical examples from local school visits, the program successfully sensitized and raised the students’ awareness about many facets of the school reality that has an impact on successful school management or on implementing diversified curricula according to brain-based learning principles. The outcome was a more mature analysis and discussion of the two fields.

Documentation or presentations on these aspects may well have been provided to the students but not internalized because of the pressure on time. Alternatively, this introductory type of input could be taken care of during student preparations in Thailand prior to departure for the US to save valuable time for their specialist programs.

4.3 Thai students struggling with English

As we will observe, it seems that the students may actually have felt more calm and composed in the classroom than outside. A participant explained that the ‘professor tried to understand (her) … and to make the classroom climate more relaxed and happy to learn.’ Clearly, the groups appreciated the way in which their teachers engaged with them, encouraged a more relaxed environment and supported interactions. As a consequence of the supportive classroom environment, some participants claimed that ‘...the experience equipped [them] with higher confidence in English to speak out ...

Participants were of the view that their English language preparation should have taken place before their departure. For instance, one participant referred to ‘poor preparation for use of English … poor preparation for dealing with questions … unpreparedness … to discuss health and weather’. We infer from the interviews that it will be useful for the organizers at UDRU to make arrangements for two language coaches—one for the development of skills and vocabulary in the discipline and the other for the development of conversational skills with a school teacher. Students can be made responsible to prepare for general beginner/tourist situations. This approach accords with arguments for linking language learning to a particular context of use.

Maintaining a conversation is a worrisome prospect to any second language speaker. It is also true that some preparation will lessen discomfort especially where the direction of the conversation is more or less predictable. For example, before their visit, students may be advised to prepare themselves (a) with answers to the most commonly anticipated questions they are likely to receive (e.g.: Q: How big is Thailand education system? A: there are x students in y schools and z teachers; e.g. 2: What subjects and grades do you teach? A: as appropriated).

4.4 Teaching and learning model

The ease with which the Thai students transition from their accustomed mode of teaching and learning to the style characteristic of SMSU can provide some indication of how successful the program is likely to be.

We have already noted in preceding discussion that the UDRU students appreciated the way in which their SMSU teachers engaged with them to encourage a more relaxed approach and to support interaction. Specifically, this included inter alia light hearted introductions to put people at ease, and employing ice-breakers such as singing songs, and ‘brain gym’ to start off the sessions.
An unintended consequence of the program was that it created awareness among the students of different backgrounds between the teaching methods used at UDRU and SMSU. This is a natural and inevitable consequence of a university fulfilling its role through forging international partnerships such as with SMSU in order to bring its students into contact with the global circulation of ideas and social scientists. In this process, it was to be expected that UDRU students would come into contact with different approaches and philosophies of the models of learning.

The recent policy convergence in favor of a student driven model of learning with the teacher as facilitator reflects a consensus shared by many governments, funding agencies, researchers and education theorists. Nevertheless, there are surely thousands of universities on the globe in which a traditional teaching style predominates. Although this project is based on a small group of URD PhD students, it finds them to be in favor of a student driven model of learning. Lecturers at UDRU and other Thai universities may find this outcome to be of interest.

At this time, it is up to the teachers of graduate programs at UDRU, and primarily to the teachers on this course, to do what they plan to do.

5. Conclusion

This study has generated several outcomes that will be useful to the respective university partners: through identifying expectations and then the learning gains realized from a student perspective, in confirming themes as important for further investigation, in identifying an unintended consequence of the program, in providing some pointers for making the program more effective, and in identifying options for further research. It is hoped that information and analysis generated from this research initiative by staff involved will contribute to ongoing sustainability of the SMSU-UDRU international program.

The UDRU students are exposed to a program based on a virtuous triangular relationship between three inputs. First, curriculum theory/school administration theory is discussed in class. The theory input provides a framework or scaffolding affording a vantage point to view the domain of practice. Second, students have the opportunity to visit US schools over three weeks where they can view/experience the theoretical concepts in practice and/or outcomes of praxis. Third, students have the option to relate the first two perspectives to their own school/educational situation and consider the prospects for application of the theory.

The students had the opportunity and privilege to contrast their own home system of education with the Minnesota sub-system of the US, and as such were practising as de facto comparative educationists. They probably realized that through the vantage point of an alternative or comparative perspective, the observer can better understand the characteristics of their own environment. Even though a Thai-US comparative exercise was not formally made a part of the program, it was nevertheless present and ripe for exploration especially in debriefing of the school visit excursions, but also in the class situation and informal discussions that took place during the three weeks.

Can we assume that this student group constituted from teaching and administrative professionals currently employed in the education system took their realizations with them and would be sufficiently motivated to apply a few innovations in their own school environments? This may not necessarily involve copying US examples, but may involve making small locally appropriate changes in their own Thai environment that were sparked off by their experience. Comparative education is no longer the much caricatured colonial ritual of copying a practice from one educational system and reproducing it in another.

Further study could uncover the short to intermediate term impacts of attending the program on the daily practice of the participants.

It has to be stated that the visit to SMSU was very simply an uplifting personal experience for many members of the Thai PhD group. One administrator related how the experience refreshed and reinvigorated her enthusiasm for leadership as follows: It ‘widened my thinking … cheered me up about my work … especially ideas to implement my new management knowledge as a school principal… if I had not gone, I would never have known so many things’. The evidence reviewed suggests that the program also contributes to raising levels of
awareness and insight in the minds of the participants—that can support a vision for a personal change or even institutional change.

This research project provides evidence that the SMSU-UDRU program generates a developmental dividend in the form of increased knowledge, heightened critical awareness, improved language skills, and a modest inclination implement innovative curriculum and administrative practices in Thai schools.

References