

2016-05

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Woodend, J., et al. (2016, May). Critical Thinking in International Contexts: Poly-Ethnographic Accounts of Multicultural Research Collaboration. In M. Takeuchi, A.P. Preciado Babb, & J. Lock. IDEAS 2016: Designing for Innovation Selected Proceedings. Paper presented at IDEAS 2016: Designing for Innovation, Calgary, Canada (pg 92-101). Calgary, Canada: Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

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# **CRITICAL THINKING IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS: POLY-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF MULTICULTURAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION**

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*In December 2015, selected doctoral students and faculty from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the University of Calgary (U of C) participated in a seminar hosted by Beijing Normal University (BNU) for interdisciplinary/international collaboration. In this paper the U of C participants outlined their reflections of this experience through a poly-ethnographic approach, with consideration for the Twelfth Dimension Framework for School Systems Success. The main themes that emerged included the role of culture and the impact of power dynamics when working academically on an international level.*

Keywords: Transnational Interdisciplinary Collaboration; Poly-Ethnography

The Twelfth Dimension Framework for School Systems Success of the College of Alberta School Superintendents' (CASS) asserts the importance of relationship building between educators in terms of effective practice in 21st century knowledge era learning environments (CASS, 2011). An exemplar of relationship-building involved three Universities (Chinese, Australian, and Canadian), which participated in an annual Doctoral Seminar held in Beijing in December 2015. This seminar was a unique opportunity for participants to engage in research relationship building in the global context. The objective of this seminar was to engage a total of eighteen doctoral

2016. In M. A. Takeuchi, A. P. Preciado Babb, & J. Lock (Eds.). *Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing for Innovation*, pp. 92-101. Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary.

students and four faculty members in multicultural, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and scholarly activities.

The generation of “new knowledge” created through collaborative work is at the core of the Framework for School Systems Success (CASS, 2011, p. 1). This annual International Doctoral Seminar provided an innovative platform through which researchers could form these types of partnerships on a global scale. International research collaborations of this kind can foster the sharing of new perspectives in addressing global problems with national and local applicability (Ryan, Kang, Mitchell, & Erickson, 2009). Given the 2015 Seminar theme, “Educational Reform in International Contexts: Australia, Canada and China”, the literature details the significant impact and development from these three countries working together to inform international collaborative research through professional learning communities that span multiple cultural systems (Ryan et al., 2009). Specifically, in the era of globalization, and China’s large-scale and ongoing complex process of education reform within its public school system, the influence of western models (e.g., Canada and Australia) of education have encouraged cross-cultural collaboration (Guo, 2013; Ryan, et al., 2009). The participants of this seminar had sought to highlight these influences and brought to the forefront critical benefits and challenges in effectuating reform.

Throughout the seminar, there were research presentations and debate about educational reform. The U of C representatives documented their observations, experiences, and reflections. Through a poly-ethnographic approach, the aim of this paper was to examine the dialogic interactions to discover how meaning was made of this experience and the resulting impact to scholarly practices.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PERSPECTIVE**

The U of C representatives were five doctoral students and two faculty members. Throughout all phases of the seminar - including academic and cultural preparation meetings, the onsite experience at BNU, and post-seminar collaboration - the dominant approaches for our engagement were reflection and dialogue. These approaches allowed diverse perspectives to emerge, not only within our own group, but across the larger group, ultimately creating an international community of practice, informed by experience and learning (Dewey, 1938). This emphasis on experience and learning led Kolb (1984) to develop a theory of adult learning called experiential learning theory. In turn Kolb and Kolb (2005) extended this theory to argue that the process of experiential learning is guided by six propositions: (a) learning as a process; (b) ideas drawn out, discussed and refined; (c) exploration of perspectives through reflection, action, feeling, and thinking; (d) learning is holistic; (e) learning through interactions within the environment; and (f) learning as constructivist in nature. As we engaged in dialogue and reflection, guided by these six propositions of experiential learning, two dominant and critical themes emerged.

## **METHOD**

As one of the five traditional approaches to qualitative research (Creswell, 2012), ethnography informed our poly-ethnographic approach whereby the interpretations of a common phenomenon of two (i.e., duo-ethnography) or more individuals (i.e., poly-ethnography) is explored based on their own life experiences. As Nabavi and Lund (2012) noted, “Duo-ethnographies, due to their nature of examining difference and different perspectives of difference, move research to a place of ambiguity in which multiple meanings can be celebrated for their unique contributions in understanding and improving the human condition” (p. 178). Furthermore, the authors posited

that “Duo-ethnography marks a turning point in research in which the hegemony of a unified narration is replaced with multiple forms of thought that do not seek convergence but celebrate diversity” (p. 178). As a group of seven, this approach enabled us to embrace our experiences guided by our theoretical framework through diverse perspective lenses including educational psychology, global mindedness, language, and cross-cultural collaboration. Norris (2008) provided a thorough review of the tenets of duo-ethnography, which informed our investigation process.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Within poly-ethnography “one approach is the integration of data collection and analysis processes within the writing itself. The storytelling (collection) and discussion (analysis) are part of the writing process, not discrete phases” (Norris, 2008, p. 236). For this paper, data collection consisted of conversational interviews (Blommaert & Jie, 2010), observations, and documents including field notes and reflective journal entries. The following narratives were guided by Kolb and Kolb's (2005) six tenets of experiential learning theory and a dialogic cycle of analysis between the U of C participants, which led to two emergent themes (Sawyer and Norris, 2012). As the findings are based on the personal and professional reflections of the U of C participants, a brief description of their research interests is provided in order to give context to their reflections. Jon Woodend is a Ph.D student with research interests in international career transitions. Lisa Fedoruk is a Ph.D student looking at the lived experiences of Chinese visiting scholars in Canada. Avis Beek is an Ed.D candidate researching international mindedness in International Baccalaureate students. Xueqin Wu, a Ph.D candidate, is investigating adult beginning learners' engagement in learning Mandarin. Sylvie Roy, a faculty member, is looking at language ideologies and power. Janet Groen, a faculty member and the Canadian coordinator, is looking at

transformative learning and spirituality in adult learning. Xiang Li's PhD research focused on the inter-subjectivity of cultures/values projected on Chinese students living in North America.

## **FINDINGS: STORYTELLING THROUGH DIALOGUE**

In starting, Janet asked the group about our general experiences participating in the doctoral seminar. From this question, two key themes emerged: the role of culture and the impact of power.

### **The Role of Culture**

The first theme was culture. Specifically, we discussed how culture influenced our role in the seminar and what aspects of the seminar we found important in comparison to participants from China and Australia. The following conversation ensued.

**Xiang:** For me as a Chinese, while the Chinese participants showed their hospitality to our group as a whole, some personal connections started to build between the Canadian and Chinese students. We even went a step further ahead as we were willing to share our life stories to each other as old friends. It is incredible that we just got to know each other. The trust seemed to be gained automatically between Chinese participants.

**Avis:** Our Chinese counterparts were absolutely gracious hosts to the Australian and Canadian representatives and it was impossible not to notice the effort they put forth to make our stay comfortable. The Chinese students patiently helped us navigate the campus, politely answered our many questions and ensured all our needs were being taken care of. When I asked Xueqin about this, she said that this was “just the Chinese way”.

**Xueqin:** I am quite familiar with the “Chinese way” of hospitality. There is a Confucius saying, “Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?” The Chinese student

participants acted as multi-taskers in this seminar, both as participants and hosts. They naturally took it as part of their responsibility to make sure that students from Australia and Canada were well taken care of throughout the seminar. For them, being a good host was as important as being a participant.

**Lisa:** The “Chinese way” of hosting us as guests was a beautiful gesture; however, I feel that such focus on our comfort took away from relationships that could have been deeper and more profound in the context of why we were visiting, namely co-constructed discourse, interdisciplinary writing and sharing of our research and experiences as doctoral students.

**Jon:** I wished that the Chinese participants had been able to relinquish their host role a bit in order to further engage academically as it felt like a missed opportunity.

**Sylvie:** I agree with Lisa that sometimes after the initial welcome, it would have been nice to start to work together as partners. This is where I think language and communication are keys to communicate our needs and understandings but when we don’t speak the language, it is difficult to understand the nonverbal or the actions part of a relationship. In addition, we didn’t know as new guests what to expect and how to proceed.

**Xueqin:** Seeing from the Western perspective, some of the hospitality was not necessary such as preparing the tea for each student. It would have been more desirable if the Chinese students had more free time so that I could talk to them more, be it about their research or their life.

**Avis:** I wonder if the Canadians or Australians would find it as instinctive to offer this level of hospitality and generosity when these seminars are held at their respective institutions.

### **The Impact of Power Dynamics**

The second theme that we discussed was power. In this case, we defined power as the relative ability to participate and be visible during the conversation. The following discussion ensued.

**Sylvie:** What does power mean exactly? Who has power? I think that the three groups thought they might have some type of power at some point but we also came to Beijing prepared to learn and to be humble. But when no one is speaking and everyone wants to be nice with others people who are used to having some type of power will start to emerge and impose without knowing.

**Lisa:** Power is an interesting word and depending on how it is understood, each individual may have their own definition. I also feel “power” can be somatic, in that it is what an individual feels internally in certain situations. There were certainly power differentials throughout the seminar starting with English as the primary language of communication.

**Xueqin:** The fact that English was the lingua franca at the doctoral seminar placed native English speakers at a more powerful position than the non-native speakers as far as the academic exchange was concerned. Some Chinese students did mention that some native English speakers spoke so fast during their presentations that they could hardly follow. What’s more, the unfamiliar research topics added onto the difficulty in comprehending the presentations.

**Lisa:** Understandably, having two native-level English groups engaged in discourse at times contributed to a feeling of intimidation or lost in translation for the Chinese participants. This might have been a key reason why there was little engagement from this group.

**Jon:** This really created an environment where the Australians and Canada were visible participants while the Chinese participants seemed to be invisible with little representation. I

believe this was because the majority of the conversations were being engaged in English, the second language of the Chinese participants, creating linguistic barriers to equal participation.

**Janet:** The visibility of the Australians and the Canadians with little representation from the Chinese participants was felt by me immediately after the opening ceremony events when the coordinator of the Chinese group left the room. The remaining faculty members, Australian and Canadian, suddenly shifted gears moving into the role of pedagogical leaders. We worried about the fact that, while we were in a conference room at the Chinese university, it was faculty members from other institutions who were ‘running the seminar’. And of course, all of our communication was in English.

**Xueqin:** This could be one of the major reasons why we saw less participation from the Chinese students. A Chinese student noted, she barely managed to absorb the content of the presentation when the question time was over, which left her with no chance to ask any questions.

**Sylvie:** Power and language are always the obvious dynamic to observe when we talk about a group working together. Yes, the English language dominated during the seminar because we are used to it and expect it without even thinking of what it represented. Chinese speakers could have used their language to shift the power but being the hosts, they didn’t. If we had been in another country, such as France, there would have been more people complaining and even disturbing the power relation with languages. Why is that?

**Avis:** I wonder if there are ways we could shift this power dynamic in terms of the dominant language of future meetings of the International Doctoral Seminar. Can we take measures to make text materials more accessible? Can we minimize time spent listening to lectures? Can we design sessions that are more collaborative and involve the co-construction of knowledge?

## CONCLUSION

This seminar and its resulting academic work provided a frame of reference for the participants to embrace diverse perspectives for inter-cultural collaboration. Poly-ethnography is characterized as a means of disrupting the meta-narrative of solitary writing, encouraging the articulation and discussion of differences (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). However, when this juxtaposition of reflective perspectives was superimposed on top of the shared experience of the seminar, themes of convergence emerged. Specifically, new knowledge was reframed within a broader lens of the role of culture and power dynamics. The poly-ethnographic approach required each author to “simultaneously generate, interpret, and articulate data” (Norris, 2008, p. 234). The resulting circle of dialogue created a shared experience reminiscent of Kolb’s model of experiential learning in that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2014, p. 49). The outcomes encouraged personal agency and responsibility in international educational contexts, consciousness raising and providing voice through collaboration, and promoting connectivity between ‘self’ and ‘other’. The result of this experience was significant as it contributed to the advancement and growth of research practices of emerging scholars, which in turn enhanced the development of research practices within education and across cultural contexts.

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