Chapter 19

Of Chalk and Chai: Teach Abroad Experiences that Enhance Cultural Adaptability of Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad opportunities specifically designed for PK-12 pre-service teachers in their disciplines are rare as a part of education degrees. While the design, implementation, and continuous improvement of international experiences for pre-service teachers are not without challenges, the gains for participants and strides toward the globalization and re-humanization of the profession are well worth the efforts for internationalization of teacher preparation. This chapter focuses on the experience of establishing teach abroad programs in India and South Africa for education majors at the University of Missouri. The overarching goal of this culturally-immersive experience is to better prepare future teachers to effectively perform in multicultural classrooms. The program seeks to promote the development of the participants’ cultural self-awareness and adaptability, and to facilitate their access to firsthand experiences with diverse world views.

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural classrooms are a given factor of educational settings in the United States, demanding that pupils at every level of the education spectrum be prepared to function in an interconnected global environment. This heightened expectation requires teachers to have a keen understanding of that global environment. The training of future teachers to comprehend and be engaged in “issues of global significance” (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011) so that they can educate others requires enriched curricula and experiential learning that go beyond the confines of their national borders. Faced with the dynamics of globalization, one would expect that teacher preparation programs would be at the forefront of internationalizing curriculum and student experiences. Yet, the internationalization of teacher preparation lags
behind that of other majors and the exposure to international context is minimal. This is true even when it comes to meaningful interaction with peers or faculty from international backgrounds.

The internationalization of teacher preparation carries with it the potential of reducing prejudice, enhancing cross-national understanding, infusing the profession with a global mindset, and promoting peace and understanding through a culture of relatedness instead of otherness. Pre-service teachers who participate in programs that intentionally provide ample opportunity for engagement with the host culture and its people often assume the role of ambassadors for the host culture and maintain professional and personal relationships with mentor teachers, students, and local friends upon re-entry. When they speak about their experience abroad to their own students, they do so from a position of personal knowledge. They often seek opportunities to return to the host country or to facilitate visits from their friends and peers to their home country.

It is not enough to deploy pre-service teachers solely to provide them with an enriching experience abroad. In the planning of the University of Missouri (MU) initiatives, great consideration was given to the impact of the U.S.-sent pre-service teachers and accompanying faculty upon the receiving school. Stakeholders came together for the creation of collaborative teach abroad programs mindfully rooted in reciprocal learning and mutualism that allows pre-service teachers to become a part of an organization’s and a community’s culture abroad providing the type of inter-group contact known to minimize prejudice (Allport, 1954). The following teach abroad factors allow pre-service teachers to unpack their cultural identity and become culturally adaptable in authentic and meaningful ways: facilitation of co-learning while co-teaching; opportunities for collaboration before, during, and after the abroad experience; programs guided by common goals; sanctioning by the sending and receiving institutions; and opportunities for friendships to develop. The results are high levels of relatedness among participants and people from various groups within the host environment abroad.

The MU College of Education (through its Mizzou Ed Teach Abroad initiative) established programs where pre-service teachers are immersed in the organizational culture of partner schools abroad while actively exploring and adapting to the local culture of the host nation. This chapter provides an overview of the programs, the purposeful outcomes sought through their implementation, the challenges encountered, and how the challenges are overcome. It also provides suggestions for faculty and administrators interested in establishing similar programs for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Background

For the last 10 years, study abroad participation figures for education majors in the U.S. had lingered right above the 4% mark, falling to 3.7% for the last reporting year (Institute of International Education, 2015). U.S. pre-service teachers are not the only ones in the world to lack international exposure. Among their European counterparts, in the academic year 2012-2013, only 3.3% of education majors participated in the ERASMUS Programme for student exchange (European Commission, 2014), seemingly corroborating the European Commission’s earlier assertion “that international mobility is not a common preference of future teachers” (European Commission, 2006, p. 6, in Jaritz, 2011). According to the 2015 Open Doors Report, Canada ranks highest on education majors’ participation in study abroad with 4.9%. Of the top three countries sending students to the U.S. for study abroad, 1.7% of Chinese, 0.4% of Indian, and 3.0% of South Korean students were education majors. Since the data does not distinguish undergraduates from graduates in this category, it is difficult to determine how many of those travelled as part of their basic teacher preparation program.