ABSTRACT

Student teaching abroad is becoming increasingly popular in many colleges and universities in the United States. This experience can be highly rewarding in terms of developing pre-service teachers’ culture competency, yet can pose challenges for faculty monitoring such placements. Stewart and Kagan (2005) suggest a framework for teacher preparation programs that have recognized the value of international experiences gained when students participate in host countries’ classrooms. This qualitative research collective case study examined the use of a wiki discussion forum as a technology supported communication tool rooted in engagement theory for pre-service teachers to better communicate reflections, questions, or concerns they may have in working with their students during international pre-service teacher experiences. This paper reports the results of an analysis of data collected from an instructor-prompted wiki discussion board used by three student cohorts that participated in international field placements. Results indicated that online technology facilitated student engagement in the experience and that the international placement fostered the development of their cultural competency.

Keywords: Cultural Competency, Pre-Service Teacher Experience, Student Teaching, Teachers’ Cultural Competency, Teaching Abroad

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THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHERS

The demand for individuals to work efficiently across multiple cultures permeates almost every aspect of 21st century life. People must be able to relate to and communicate with the cultural other in order to be successful in the global economy. This is especially true for teachers in K-12 education whose classroom is a microcosm of demographic shifts. The National Education Association (NEA) calls this professional trait “cultural competence” (NEA, 2008; NEA, 2011) and has espoused the following definition, which originated with Diller and Moule (2005):

The ability to successfully teach students who come from a culture or cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, understanding certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching and culturally responsive teaching. (p. 2)

Additionally, Moule (2012) asserts that there are five skill areas linked with teacher cultural competence development:

1. **Awareness and Acceptance of Differences:** Developing an “awareness of the ways in which cultures differ and realizing that these differences may affect the learning process” (p. 14) and accepting these differences.

2. **Self-Awareness:** Understanding how one’s own culture affects the learning process as well as anticipating one’s “cultural limits” (p. 15).

3. **Dynamics of Difference:** Becoming aware of “what can go wrong in cross-cultural communication and knowing how to set it right” (p. 16).

4. **Knowledge of the Student’s Culture:** Familiarizing oneself with a student’s culture so that “behavior may be understood within its own cultural context” (p. 16).

5. **Adaptation of Skills:** Using this knowledge and adapting teaching practices to accommodate these differences in order to improve learning and parent/teacher relationships. (p. 17)

Those teachers who have the above skill set, which can also be referred to as cultural with-it-ness, are able to identify and use cultural cues in order to enhance student performance, thereby demonstrating what is referred to as culturally relevant teaching (Billings, 1995). Yet, teacher preparation programs are still lacking instruction that enables candidates to facilitate choice mechanisms in the classroom, which would foster international literacy and global competence (Stewart & Kagan, 2005).

Establishing opportunities that move pre-service teaching candidates from the familiarity of their own language metaphors to new experiences encourages them to critically examine their Western views of the world (Sharma, 2009), which can lead to increased global awareness. Many examples of cross-cultural initiatives exist in the literature including, but not limited to, descriptions of flexible field placement programs (Stewart & Kagan, 2005; Romano & Cushner, 2007; Espinetti & Jenner, 2008; Longview Foundation, 2008; Marx, 2008). Stewart and Kagan (2005) suggest a structure for teacher preparation programs that have recognized the value of international experiences and teacher pedagogy, which can be experienced firsthand by observing and participating in host countries’ classrooms.

In this framework, pre-service teacher programs must create opportunities for classroom observations in other countries for teaching candidates, seek out institutional partnerships between schools and university schools of education, and establish early childhood professional associations outside the borders of the United States in order to foster a deeper understanding of the international dimension of content pedagogy. Such initiatives provide teaching candidates with the ability to complete their internship abroad with the rationale that the experience will be the “catalyst that starts
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