

Supporting cross-cultural adaptation during practice teaching in China: Reflections on seven years of year experience.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a seven-year study that investigated strategies employed to facilitate the development of cross-cultural adaptation by 154 preservice teachers before, during and after their 3 week practicum experiences in China. These strategies are related to a 4 stage model of individual adaptation to a new culture (Brick, 1991).

The findings showed that over the years we became more successful in facilitating the adaptation process especially during the critical 2nd stage of this process. Our data also showed that almost all preservice teachers progressed through to the 3rd stage of a 4-stage process of adaptation. Their progress through these stages was facilitated by the creation and maintenance of a viable 'practicum community'. The success of this community depended on the commitment of members to its maintenance.

Introduction

Several universities in Australia and overseas give preservice teachers the opportunity to teach in other countries and various researchers have reported the benefits of these experiences (Brill, 1995; McFarlane, 1997; Booth, 1997). Since the early 1980's the University of Wollongong has provided preservice teachers with the opportunity to teach in China, Malaysia, Fiji or Thailand. Even though students self-fund their overseas practicum experience, these programs have been operating almost continuously which attests to the popularity of the overseas practicum experiences offered. The authors of this paper have coordinated the China practicum since 1991 and have taken over 150 preservice teachers to Beijing where they taught English to students enrolled in Senior Vocational High Schools. The age of day-students enrolled in these schools ranges from 16 to 20 years. The curriculum at these schools focuses on training for jobs in the financial and commercial sectors (e.g. local and foreign companies, banks and large hotels).

The current program is continually refined and these refinements have been informed by data gathered by interviews and surveys conducted each year before, during and after the overseas practicum as well as changes that occur in China. Over the years the data gathered has helped the authors to develop strategies that assisted preservice teachers involved in the practicum to build a self-sustaining 'practicum community' (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993) that supports them as they adapt to living and teaching in a new culture.

Adapting to a new culture

When going to a new culture it is impossible to avoid culture shock altogether as much of what a person has learnt about interpreting the actions of people around him is suddenly irrelevant. Strategies used to influence people and events in certain ways are no longer effective. Further, the ability to distinguish between the significant and insignificant in a given

situation become difficult, if not impossible. As a result, the person experiences feelings of disorientation, frustration and helplessness (Brick, 1991; Furnham & Bocher, 1986). In the case of the practicum, preservice teachers also have to teach a class of students so they are likely to experience culture shock from two sources from within the classroom and from their experiences outside the classroom.

Physical symptoms of culture shock may include headaches, stomach-aches, diarrhoea, fatigue, sleeping disorder and a general feeling of malaise (Brick, 1991). However, this does not mean that individuals who experience culture shock are inflexible and cannot adapt. Instead it means that temporarily they are finding it difficult to adjust and some steps need to be taken to reduce the impact of culture shock (Furnham & Bocher, 1986).

There are several models of cultural adaptation in the literature (Bennett, 1991; Brake, Walker & Walker, 1995; Brick 1991). Each of these models asserts that when people experience culture shock, they go through various stages of adaptation. Brick's (1991) model is used in this study because its stages more accurately reflect the context of the China practicum. Brick (1991) describes the first stage, which can be very short, as euphoria. Everything is seen as fascinating and to the Australian student teacher; Beijing is an amazing city with its bicycles and bustle but it still preserves its sense of history and traditions. These feelings give way to a sense of alienation when people don't react as expected. For example shopping can be confusing as the Chinese shops don't look the same as Australian shops. Also the shop assistants may appear unconcerned, chatting away in the corner of the shop. Even payment can be an ordeal as the shop assistant may not accept payment. Often payment has to be made at a separate counter and two receipts issued; one is retained by the customer and the second is given to the shop assistant in return for the goods. To an Australian this process seems to require more effort and there doesn't seem to be any reason for the process. People may even imagine that the host-country nationals seem intent on being unhelpful and even obstructive.

It is at this stage that the symptoms of culture shock are likely to manifest themselves. Prior to stage 2 strategies already need to be in place to support people through this process. With peer support and open discussion with experienced locals, people can be assisted to learn some of the basic 'ground rules' that will enable them to interpret some of the situations in which they find themselves and to act in appropriate ways in these situations. Slowly the sense of alienation decreases as the feeling of in some way being able to control events returns.

Most people do not progress beyond the 3rd stage as their adjustment is sufficient for them to operate effectively within their new culture. While they remain essentially outside the culture they can accomplish everyday tasks and feel confident in doing so. However, there is a 4th stage: that of acculturation. At this stage the individual can operate appropriately, effectively and confidently in a wide range of situations within the host culture. Brick (1991) argues that for this to occur the person usually has to be fluent in the language of the host country.

The 4 stages are represented by figure 1. The time axis is an attempt to show the relationship between these stages and the 3 week practicum (recognising that each person will move through these stages at different rates).

Figure 1: The 4 stages involved in the adjustment to a new culture

(After Brick, 1991).

Preparation of preservice teachers

Prior preparation of preservice teachers helps them to make the adjustment process easier and can cushion the effect of culture shock by shortening the time that it takes to move from stage 1 to stage 3. Brill (1995, p.50) described her prior preparation of students as focusing on house keeping details, "the preparation of units of work for teaching English in Inner Mongolia" and mentions "one social gathering, just prior to departure". This is similar to the process of preparation described by Weckert (1997). McFarlane (1997, p.4) uses a more formalised process that includes weekly meetings plus successful completion of an academic preparation course. He claims that this preparation is designed to "cushion the inevitable culture shock" (p.8). By way of contrast Booth (1997) uses a less formal approach when preparing student teachers for a practicum in Fiji and makes use of "an informal orientation program" (p.3) followed up by a one day school-based program when they arrive in Fiji.

The literature describing the preparation of preservice teachers involved in overseas practicums mentions the following themes: developing lesson plans, cushioning culture shock, education about the culture (including some basic language) and some social activities prior to departure (Hill, Thomas & Coté, 1997). Another common theme that emerges from the descriptions of prior preparation of students undertaking overseas practicums is the lack of official recognition (at a University level) for the time that staff and students must put into the preparation phase. However, there was little if any mention of on-going support even though it was reported that "the vigours and demands of the practicum are extremely testing" and the "continued lesson planning which often went until the early hours of the morning as well as incorporating a hectic tourist/social schedule often drained

me to the point of exhaustion" (Weckert, 1997, p.9). This we feel is a weakness with many programs as more than prior preparation is needed-instead there needs to be ongoing support.

Over a period of seven years we shifted the focus of our preparation program from one that concentrated on prior preparation to one that concentrated on developing strategies that would empower preservice teachers to create sustainable, on-going support structures that assisted them while they were teaching and adjusting to a new culture. Like other universities the program received no official support in terms of staffing load or recognition of student learning. While the university was happy to gain the kudos from this program they were reluctant to support this program financially.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to use the data gathered from the practicum experiences to inform our development of an effective and sustainable support program for preservice teachers who were going to teach in China. It was important that the program would effectively support the preservice teachers through the first 3 stages of cultural adaptation (Brick, 1991) as well as support their professional development as teachers. Therefore the emphasis was upon continued support rather than just upon prior preparation.

The research questions were:

1. Are different forms of support needed at different stages of the practicum?
2. How and when should this support be provided?
3. Who should provide this support?

Methods

The study was undertaken over a seven year period and involved 154 preservice teachers enrolled in various education degrees at the University of Wollongong. All persons involved in the study were volunteers and had successfully completed a 3 week practicum. Most were highly motivated as they had applied to participate in the practicum. Also they had to raise \$2500 each to pay for accommodation and airfares. Eighty seven were training to be secondary teachers and seventy seven were training to be primary teachers.

The 3 week practicum was based at two schools in Beijing, No.148 Vocational High School and Dong Cheng Senior Vocational High School. Both schools train senior students for jobs in the financial and commercial sector (e.g. local and foreign companies, banks and large hotels) and are similar to the commerce sections of TAFE colleges in Australia.

Each preservice teacher taught a class of approximately 24 students for 3 one-hour lessons each day. These lessons were English-based and focussed on speaking and listening activities designed to promote cultural exchange. For example a series of lessons may concentrate on sharing how people gain and change employment in China compared to Australia, and another may concentrate on sharing how Chinese people purchase and prepare food compared to how Australians purchase and prepare food.

When the practicum commenced preservice teachers were asked to keep a journal. The purpose of the journal was for each person to record personal reflections on daily events. We asked for permission to read their journals after the practicum had finished and individual teaching reports were written. This strategy was designed to elicit honest

responses as preservice teachers may not be candid with their comments if they thought that it could affect their practicum report. It was stressed that we wanted honest and frank responses to all aspects of the program but suggested that they may comment on the prior preparation, on-going support, organisation of daily events and any other issues that they considered relevant.

A follow up survey (see appendix 1) was issued at a debriefing meeting held one week after preservice teachers returned to Australia. The purpose of this survey was to triangulate journal findings and to elicit further responses. Further data was gathered one year later from interviews with 4 or 5 volunteers from the previous cohort of preservice teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to determine if any of the major responses had changed and to ascertain if any were maintaining an interest in Chinese culture.

The data was divided into the stages mentioned in figure one. The initial criteria used for the journal entries was time (i.e. week 1 corresponded to stage 1; week 2 to stage 2 and week 3 to stage 3). This initial cull was further refined as individual entries were read. The criteria for this were based upon key words from the descriptions of each stage of adjustment. Comments that could not be categorised into a specific stage by both researchers were included in a separate category which we called 'additional comments'.

The survey questions were designed after reading the journal entries. We deliberately made them open-ended so that responses would not be restricted. When we categorised the responses we used the key words from the 3 stages as described previously. A similar approach was used with the transcripts for the follow up interviews.

Findings

The findings are organised under 4 sub-headings that relate to the stages previously mentioned. At the end of the presentation of findings for each stage we describe the form of support we provided is described.

Stage 1-Eurphoria

We found that this stage in our sample lasted from 3 to 7 days with the majority moving to stage 2 after 5 or 6 days. During this stage typical comments were:

"it is a wonderful experience" (Margaret, day 2, 1991)

"teaching is so exciting and the students are becoming really good friends with me" (Narelle, day 4, 1993)

"the feeling of excitement was evident on all of our faces as we arrived" (Sheridan, day 1, 1991).

"Beijing is like a huge classroom about China" (Rob, day 3, 1995).

However 11 journal entries from the first cohort (1991) mentioned that they would have benefited from some time to acclimatise to the hot weather and different food. In subsequent years we organised to arrive 4 days earlier and stay at a teachers sanatorium in the Jinhaihu district (80km from Beijing). This facility is located near some tourist sites (the Great Wall and Eastern Qing tombs) and is linked to a local school where preservice teachers could visit and observe classes. This strategy helped to cushion the dual load of having to immediately adjust to a culture and begin teaching. Comparisons of journal entries from the

first cohort with succeeding cohorts showed that although this strategy made the experience more enjoyable, it didn't make any impact on the first stage but may have made an impact on the second stage.

Journals and survey responses from subsequent cohorts mention the value of the time spent at Jinhaihu as this "gave them time to settle in" (Vicki survey response from the 1993 cohort) and "to see some of the sights without being among the crowds of the city" (Dean, survey response from the 1996 cohort). We believe that this strategy supports preservice teachers by providing the opportunity to acclimatise, strengthen friendships and support the process of building a 'practicum community'.

Stage 2: Depression - even the simplest things can be difficult

Over a seven-year period we observed that virtually all of the group go through this stage. The intensity and duration varies enormously and the following journal and survey quotes are indicators of this phase:

"I am finding everything to be draining and exhausting... I'm getting wearier and wearier."
(Sheridan, day 8, 1991).

"...the pushy Chinese people seem to take up all the walkway and get in our way"
(Samantha, day 6, 1994).

"I am frustrated with Brian because things change and I don't know what's happening"
(Christopher, day 9, 1993).

The last comment typically occurs when visits to shops or free time have to be reorganised when the group receives an unexpected invitation to an official dinner. After day 9 in 1993 there were 7 comments of this nature at that time.

A suggestion made by several groups was to organise some "free time" during the second week so that people could relax a little and "spend more time thinking about lessons" (Christopher, follow up survey, 1993). To provide free time and the opportunity for on going peer support we needed to persuade our Chinese hosts that we were capable of taking care of ourselves when they were not there to organise events. Initially they were uneasy about this request because they felt obliged to provide us with a full agenda and the company of a translator at all times. However, we gently persisted with our request and were successful in scheduling free afternoons and a free weekend at the end of week 2; the time when most people were at stage 2 of adjustment. Usually the free afternoons developed into a mixture of large and small group discussions as well as peer support meetings among close friends. Much of the discussion centred around frustrations and concerns about their progress as teachers. Positive reinforcement, good humour, and the use of group expertise helped most members to see their frustrations in a different light. Since 1994 we have scheduled home visits with class students for the evening of the last teaching day of week 2. This strategy allowed group members to appreciate the life style of their students and to meet them in a different setting. These visits have always been a great success and seem to help preservice teachers to move through the second phase of adjustment. Many preservice teachers took advantage the day after the visit (always a free day) to arrange a social outing with the students they visited on the previous evening.

The comments in the journal entries after these meetings often took a different tone. For example:

"They are all different. They are also very gracious and giving. All very friendly" (Samantha, day 12 - after home visit, 1994). Note the difference from her previous entry.

"They are very friendly and interested people and genuinely interested in our country" (Ben, day 13, 1994).

Even though we presented videos of previous visits, used members of previous cohorts to talk to the group and discussed our own experiences during preparation meetings their impact was much less than the free time and the home visit. We feel that there may be two reasons for this. First the preparation messages were not in context whereas the home visits and informal meetings held during free time were context specific. Second, the 'practicum community' was in the formation process and did not fully appreciate the potential of their community to support them. Thus the judicious use of free time combined with the home visits were important support strategies for developing the 'practicum community' and reducing the intensity and duration of phase 2.

Phase 3: Adjustment

The majority of preservice teachers reach this stage during their practicum. However, it may take one week or three weeks. Over seven years we can only identify two persons who we felt did not reach this stage. One person came from the first cohort and one can from the most recent cohort. Both were the youngest in their cohort (age, 19) and were travelling abroad for the first time. Below is a comment from Kara's journal which shows that she was struggling with the conditions:

"There's nothing but smog and clouds in the Beijing sky and smoggy buildings...Lunch was 'fat' soup, oily meat, oily vegetables - at least I like the ice cream" (1991 cohort, day 16)

In 1992 a follow up interview was conducted with Kara. She indicated that she was still interested in China and had recommended the experience to friends in lower years. She said that "it was the opportunity of a lifetime" and that "she had really enjoyed the teaching." She also said that she would have coped better if she had occasional access to more western food. (In 1991 there was one McDonalds and 2 Pizza Huts in Beijing but by 1997 there were more than 30 so access to familiar food is now easier to organise). Similar comments were made in 1998 by the other student who admitted to being 'homesick' in spite of the support of her friends.

A selection of journal entries from people who had reached phase 3 follows.

"they are so hospitable. I know it sounds funny but I can see differences in every single Chinese person. They're beautiful" (Christoper, day 14, 1993).

"even though there are a lot of people there is still open land in the country. They are all very different. They are also very gracious and giving" (Sharon, day 15, 1998)

The following quote is chosen as representative of the summative comments made by preservice teachers about their teaching in China:

"I believe that this practicum has helped me put into practice many theories of language and learning I have explored at university. I have developed skills in ESL (English as a Second Language) type teaching by being able to explain concepts using simple language and relating it to what they know and understand. It taught me the importance of modelling and outlining structure." (Gail, day 19, 1996).

This quote shows that the context had given Gail the opportunity to put into practice what had been learnt at university, but she also realised that it was important for her to "know and understand" her students. This we feel is an important outcome for all preservice teachers in any context. At this stage, the most valued support strategy for the majority of people was the journals. Most took additional time to write entries and to informally discuss them with others (peers, Chinese friends, and lecturers). It appeared to us that as they were developing their understanding of the people and their customs, they were verifying their impressions with others. Later this impression was supported by the data from follow up interviews.

Stage 4: Adjustment

The time frame that each group spends in China is too short for this stage to be reached but there have been a few graduates who have returned to China to take up teaching positions for 6 to 12 months. Follow up contact with these people showed that they were comfortable living in China and were happy to have returned.

Conclusion

The data from our seven year experience with the China practicum upholds the proposition that different sorts of support are needed at different stages of the practicum and quite often this is best provided by various members of the 'practicum community'. The support needs to be organised in advance and its purpose has to be clearly understood by all members of the 'practicum community'. The timing and duration of the various forms of support will vary as individuals experience culture shock in different ways. Further, the form that this support takes will vary from year to year as the context changes. For example China in 1999 is a very different place to China in 1991 and some strategies used in 1991 would not be needed in 1999.

We strongly endorse the types of preparation programs conducted by others such as Brill (1995), Booth (1997), and McFarlane (1997). However, we feel that one aspect often overlooked by these programs has been the need to build a strong sense of community spirit before departure. Brill (1995, p.50) alluded to this when she mentions that she only had time for "one social gathering, just prior to departure". The types of support strategies that we have put in place rely heavily upon preservice commitment to their 'practicum community' and we spend considerable time developing this sense of community in our preparation program. We portray the practicum community as one that collectively contains a large amount of expertise that needs to be shared. We assert that the success of this community depends on all members helping each other with its maintenance and it is the responsibility of all members. This is not an easy task as there are always other demands on lecturers and preservice teachers. However, we have learnt to create space for community building in our program by reducing organisation and housekeeping meetings to a minimum and using the expertise within the group on as many occasions as possible. For example a person with ESL expertise may prepare material that can be shared with others, a person with musical skills may teach others some songs to sing and a person with some language expertise may teach us some basic Chinese.

The organisation and supervision of an overseas practicum is a complex and demanding task that requires careful preparation, energy, humour, patience, cultural sensitivity and stamina. Every year we return exhausted but content in the knowledge that the preservice teachers and our Chinese hosts have benefited from the experience. However, the story does not end with the practicum as we have organised exchange visits between Australian and Chinese schools as well as extended visits by teachers from China. This gives the program a degree of credibility and value in both countries.

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Appendix

Survey questions

1. Why did you decide to come on the Beijing practicum?
- 2 . Describe your most enjoyable moments.
 3. Describe your least enjoyable moments.
 4. What were the most important things that you learnt about the Chinese people?
 5. What were the most important things that you learnt about yourself?
 6. What were the most important things that you learnt about your peers?
 7. What were the most important things that you learnt about your students?
 8. Briefly describe any new skills that you developed during the practicum.
 9. Do you think that you will apply these skills Australia? Explain your response.
 10. How could the practicum be improved?
 11. Other comments

Interview protocol

1. Describe your most significant personal experience of the trip. When did it occur?
2. What your least significant personal experience of the trip? When did it occur?
3. What teaching skills did you develop? Please describe a specific example.
4. Did your feelings about the country and the people change over the three weeks?
(Follow up- Please tell me more about your response).
5. Would you recommend the trip to other students? Please explain why?
6. Is there anything else that the lecturers could have done to help you adjust to the country?
7. Are you interested in returning to China?
8. Are there any other comments that you would like to make?