

Crossing borders to a new person-hood: Dancers and study abroad

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Abstract

In the globalizing era in which we live, young dancers routinely cross social and cultural borders as they seek to make international contacts and learn new modes of self expression. Yet the net effect of living abroad experiences, even for short periods of time, goes beyond instrumental outcomes, like perfecting a new dance technique. Dancers who are international sojourners are exposed to a new culture, a new language, and must be able to interact with others in new communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), as novices on the periphery. The potential for personal growth is great in such interactions, but not all sojourners necessarily benefit equally. Following an ethnographic approach, the researcher in this paper focuses on a group of dance majors at a Taiwanese university as they participate in an exchange program with an American university in the United States. Using open-ended questionnaires, focus group interviews, and personal observation, the researcher explores how the sojourners manage to construct their identities within the local community of practice. It is hoped that the findings of this study can illuminate how new frames for self-understanding can emerge through intercultural interaction.

Keywords: communities of practice, legitimate peripheral participation

Globalization and affordances for new self-perceptions and life trajectories

Globalization has played an important role in the “internationalization” of tertiary institutions in many countries. This trend can be seen in the growing variety of the home institution’s study abroad offerings to many regions of the world. It is also common to find faculty of one institution spending a semester or two teaching at affiliated institutions abroad, while foreign students are recruited to study at the home institution (Jackson, 2010). Another form of internationalization involves shorter term cultural exchanges, where members of partner institutions send students and faculty to each other's campuses to research specific cultural interests.

Matthews (2000) uses the metaphor of a “global cultural supermarket” to describe how self-concepts and sources of identification across the world are changing in an era of the Internet, mass tourism, and cosmopolitanism. Sources of identity formation are no longer restricted to one’s locality; people from affluent societies seemingly are able to pick and choose identities from anywhere, as if they were choosing clothes to wear. Matthews cautions, however, that we are not entirely free to claim who we are; others must validate our choices. When students go abroad to study, there would seem to be great potential for personal growth and the development of new subject positions, in addition to gaining better fluency in a foreign language, but what does the research say?

For sojourners to really benefit from a stay abroad, the context and personal agency must come together to provide for “critical experiences” (Block, 2008), where the sojourner re-evaluates her self-concept(s) and seeks new ways of being in the world. New frames of meaning must be generated to account for the “rich points” (Agar, 1994) that separate the sojourner’s “languaculture” from that of the host context. This undertaking is not a simple or easy process, as study abroad research demonstrates. All too often, sojourners avoid meaningful interaction with their hosts for a variety of reasons, from resisting ascribed identities to tensions arising from ideological differences (Kinging, 2008). Sojourners may also find that they lack the “cultural capital” or legitimacy needed to gain entry into desired communities (Bourdieu, 1990). In summary, both the context and the sojourner are crucial variables in determining the outcome of intercultural interaction. Merely being abroad does not automatically beget any of the presumed benefits.

What is the study about?

This study investigates how dance majors from a university in Taiwan are received into the community of practice of a dance department at an American college during a 10-day cultural exchange project. There is a specific focus on whether the success of the cultural exchange project and the subject positions afforded these sojourners will subsequently lead them to invest in English-mediated identities. To this end, the study will follow a sample of these dancers over the long-term to explore how their life trajectories have been impacted by their experiences abroad.

What is a community of practice? Why was it chosen as a framework?

The study uses a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) framework to analyze the interaction between the American context and the individual agency of the Taiwanese dancers in impacting their self-perceptions and possible life trajectories. A community of practice is a group that comes together around a shared interest or enterprise. Over time, the group develops a repertoire of practices, or way of doing things, and this becomes a resource for group members and leads to an in-group identity.

As participants in a cultural exchange project, the Taiwanese dancers will be situated on the periphery of the local American CoP, which is identified in this study as the dance department of the American college and also the host families. Affordances to practices will be made available to the sojourners in the form of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The study will identify these affordances and assess how the Taiwanese dancers value and act on these affordances. As has been noted above, however, newcomers to any given study abroad CoP will not always be favorably situated. In certain contexts, the community will view a newcomer’s participation as illegitimate, and so those on the periphery will be marginalized and denied access to group practices.

The exchange project: Who are the participants?

The cultural exchange project was executed in two parts. In September, 2011, 26 dancers and 5 faculty members from a university in Taiwan spent 10 days in the United States. They were hosted by the theater and dance department of an American liberal arts college. There were 23 female and 3 male dancers, and their ages ranged from 18 to 21. Levels of English fluency varied, though each dancer had studied English for a minimum of seven years prior to the

exchange. In May, 2012, 12 American dancers and 3 faculty members, all female, were hosted by the Taiwanese university's dance department. The focus of the study here will be on the Taiwanese dancers and the impact of the sojourn and post-sojourn activities in shaping their self-concepts.

What is the aim of the cultural exchange?

One aim of the cultural exchange project was to expose dancers and faculty from each academic institution to a variety of dance genres that each dance department specializes in. Faculty from both departments offered workshops over the 10-day duration, and some of the Taiwanese students also worked with local junior high school students after performing the traditional Chinese dances they had choreographed. An additional aim of the exchange was to learn about each other's lifestyles and traditions through interacting with the public at large. This meant making outings to various venues, such as museums, markets, and schools, which I will now discuss.

How did participants engage with the host community of practice?

During the first leg of the exchange, the Taiwanese dancers were placed in pairs with host families, and much of the time during evenings and weekends was spent interacting together. Common activities included cooking lessons, carving pumpkins for Halloween, shopping excursions to local big-box and specialty stores, browsing at yard sales and the farmers' market, and taking trips farther afield to local attractions, such as a cider mill and the nearby Great Lakes. Visits to a local Native American museum and a dance demonstration at a local junior high school were also planned to give each group a taste of each other's culture.

Mornings and afternoons were spent attending dance technique classes and lectures. Both American and Taiwanese faculty taught these classes, which ranged from ballet, modern dance, and recreational dance, to ethnic dances from indigenous Taiwanese tribes and a session in Scottish Highland dancing. Some of the Taiwanese students also made presentations on Taiwanese religion, holidays, and customs in specially arranged seminars. A "buddy system" was also set up, which paired an American student and a Taiwanese student, with the local student giving tours of campus and entertaining her Taiwanese "buddy" during lunch and afternoon breaks.

The American partner in this exchange is a small liberal arts college in the state of Michigan. It has a longstanding tradition of sending its students abroad through its own programs or as guests of other tertiary study abroad programs. It has also played host to an increasing number of students from foreign countries, especially from sister institutions in East Asia. These students typically spend one academic calendar year at the college and are enrolled in mainstream classes. The school provides opportunities for intercultural interaction by designating certain college-owned properties as "national houses," where only a specified foreign language may be spoken. There is also an international club that sponsors activities throughout the year for foreign students and local students to learn about their respective cultures.

If knowledge of the world is desirable in order to bring about progress, then possessing such knowledge is a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Such capital is accrued in the relationships one has with other, influential people, something Bourdieu terms "social capital."

It also accumulates in cultural forms, such as in one's level of education or the accent one uses to express herself. Such "cultural capital" is also found in embodied forms, such as the way one moves or dresses. It should be stressed that not all forms of knowledge and competence are viewed equally; one must possess the kind of competence that society values in order to possess symbolic capital. So in applying the idea of symbolic capital to this cultural exchange project, one can see how dance competence in various genres is instrumental in mediating the Taiwanese sojourners' reception into the host community. Does it allow them to participate legitimately in the local CoP?

The following quotes, taken from the American exchange participants and local media, offer evidence of the perceived value of the cultural exchange:

As college students, this is the prime time of our lives to be adventurous. Studying at a liberal arts college, we literally have the world at our feet. With hundreds of opportunities to travel to new places and experiment with what life has to offer, staying stagnant in your beliefs can only hurt you. (*The Almanian*, September 27, 2011)

Taken from an editorial in the college newspaper, it summarizes the 10-day visit made by the Taiwanese dancers and faculty, and expresses the value that such encounters bring. In other words, it is exciting and fulfilling to learn about other places, and not having such an outlook is detrimental, although no detail is provided for why this is so.

Other points attesting to the value of the exchange and to the symbolic value it represents are made by the college president, the chair of the dance department, and one of the undergraduate participants:

This was a very valuable opportunity for our dance program, for all of our students the experience was really exciting and the whole town feels different because of their presence. (JA, President of the college)

As an educator at a liberal arts college, I feel it to be an important and necessary experience to branch out beyond the confines of the local campus and get to know another culture and to witness the learning process of this culture. (CF, Chairperson of the Dance Department)

It is important to learn new styles of dance and make new connections with the world at large. It is an honor to be part of such a project. (Sarah, Dance major)

Comments like these make it clear that many within the host context and community of practice put a high value on interacting with and learning from their Taiwanese interlocutors. This plays a crucial role in the success of the exchange, as I will detail in the next section of the presentation.

Findings:

What affordances for “legitimate peripheral participation” were offered by the host CoP?

What types of subject positions were offered to the Taiwanese dancers?

It seems that high degree of legitimate participation was afforded by the local community of practice. The Taiwanese dancers were able to participate in dance classes at the college, and take up positions as peripheral “members of the student body.” Several of the sojourners expressed the value they felt for such affordances:

It seems that American professors do not scold like in Taiwan. I feel relaxed in their classes. (Patty)

Warmness of American teachers makes me feel good in class. (Sammi)

They (local students) were very encouraging – felt I could melt into local environment. (Jade)

Just as importantly as being allowed access to the practices of the community, the Taiwanese dancers were able to contribute to the local CoP’s “economy of meaning” (Wenger, 1998) by sharing their knowledge with the local dance CoP and general community. The sojourners were offered the subject position of “expert” in many of the activities of the exchange. This was noted where the “dance expert” sojourners helped the Americans learn the steps to Taiwanese dances both at the college and at the junior high school. Several of the dancers were positioned as “cultural ambassadors” as well, giving presentations related to Taiwanese culture to college students. Perhaps the most salient example of the “expert” subject position was provided by the culminating dance performance, since the enthusiastic reception and applause that followed the curtain call was noticed and appreciated by the “dance experts” themselves:

People clapping at the curtain call of our performance – I really appreciate this. Our hard work was worth the effort. (Wendi)

I am touched that American junior high students are so passionate. I would like to teach these kinds of students in Taiwan. (Kristi)

Was there any marginalization?

As noted in the introduction, instances of marginalization are commonly detailed in study abroad research. In an exchange project like this, there was a concern that the Taiwanese sojourners’ English language ability could make communication difficult and reduce the amount of interaction that both the host CoP and the sojourners themselves would desire. Indeed, the Taiwanese sojourners’ pre-sojourn questionnaires did express such concerns, but there was an overall sense of relief present in post-sojourn questionnaire responses that communication was normally achieved. This view was largely corroborated by the Americans, who discounted any serious effects of the language gap. Indeed, some of them expressed guilt at not being able to speak Mandarin with any fluency and forcing the responsibility for communicating in a non-native language onto their Taiwanese partners. The similarities in dance practices between the two groups likely had the effect of making the classes themselves salient to all dancers, and this negated the need for native-like fluency of English.

Conclusion

The first leg of the cultural exchange project has largely been deemed a success by members of both participating institutions. This success can seemingly be attributed to the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) that each side possessed, which made them attractive partners in the first place. The effects of this cultural capital were exhibited in a number of ways, and two are noted here. First, it allowed the Taiwanese sojourners affordances to contribute to the American CoP’s economy of meaning as “expert dancers.” Their cultural knowledge and dance competence was valued by the American side. Secondly, there was ample interaction that allowed for both sides to better understand the foreign “Other.” The language barrier was largely overcome and the interaction enabled many of the sojourners to build up close relationships with their host families as peripheral family members and with their college friends as peripheral student body members. The tears in the eyes of many participants as the Taiwanese boarded the bus to the airport attest to the close links that were forged during the short duration of the first leg.

Despite this noted success, the question remains as to whether the exchange project has provided the “critical experiences” needed for the reconstruction of identities. One theme to be explored going forward will be how participants will make use of their in-project experiences in the future. Will they continue to find meaningful the subject positions that have been cultivated through their interactions during this culture exchange project? Will such self-images be called upon and be available to them when they move on to other communities of practice, influencing their life trajectories? The only way to answer such questions is through a longitudinal case study that follows exchange participants over the long term.

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