2018

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Philip J. Ward
University of South Alabama

Michelle Loo
University of South Alabama

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Not "One China," not "One Culture": Multicultural Exploration of Differences and Similarities Between Mainland China and Taiwan

Phillip J. Ward and Michelle Loo

Abstract

This study focuses on the outwardly similar cultures of Taiwan and mainland China and the subtle differences within them. The study was conducted as part of the requirements of doctoral program in Instructional Design and Development at a public university in the southeastern United States. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study demonstrates that there are cultural similarities between mainland China and Taiwan, however instructors should also be aware of the differences when developing relationships with students and developing course content. A mini-workshop was developed for the study to help teach instructors about the two cultures. However, the mini-workshop can be modified to suit the cultural context. This can lead this tool being used to help instructors design effective content for learners from diverse locations.

Key Words: higher education, Taiwan, China, intercultural education, international education, English Language Learners

Background of the Study

In an increasingly connected world, the need for cultural awareness and global competence has become crucial in higher education as the international student population grows in the United States (Martin, 2010; Sohoni & Petrovic, 2010). Harnessing the power of a global mindset is essentially a few mouse clicks away; however, to be successful, success lies within learning cultural sensitivity. As instructional designers, we aim to provide instructional experiences for acquiring knowledge in a more efficient, effective, and appealing way.

Coupling that goal with the need to bring cultural awareness and global competence to higher education, the researchers decided to examine two cultures. This paper compares seemingly similar cultures with subtle differences within them. Such analyses can be used to examine other contrasting cultures in different contexts. This study was created for a supplemental course toward the completion of a PhD in Instructional Design and Development. The researchers conducted this study at a public university in the southeastern United States.

Framework of the Study

This study was developed to gain competence in a different culture and to teach others about this culture to design effective learning experiences for diverse learners. The process involved four main steps: 1) selecting a target culture and designating an individual from that culture to act as cultural consultant; 2) writing two briefs to analyze the culture-specific factors disclosed during interactions with the cultural consultant; 3) experiencing an unfamiliar culture through a cross-cultural experience to provide a lens into the target culture; and 4) designing of a mini-workshop that can be used for an educational experience in the future.

Selecting a Target Culture and Cultural Consultant

The expertise that a cultural consultant provides is beneficial to studying cross-cultural issues because of the information, insights, and perspectives through personal experiences that

the individual belonging target culture can provide. The culture selected for this study was Asian-American. The cultural consultant who was selected is an Asian-American female, born in the United States to a mixed-heritage couple. Both parents are immigrants from Taiwan, but each parent identifies with a different ethnicity. Her mother is Aboriginal Taiwanese, with family traced back to twelve generations, and her father is originally from mainland China. The diverse cultural heritage allowed for the expansion of the study to include a cross-cultural analysis of three profiles: Asian-American; Taiwanese; and mainland Chinese.

Cultural Briefs

Two cultural briefs were created to explain aspects of the target culture as disclosed by the cultural consultant. Each brief presented a range of different themes associated with the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese cultures. The first brief focused on the political peculiarities of the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, ethnic similarities and difference between the two cultures, and stereotypes that both cultures express about each other.

Over time, the research-consultant relationship deepened and trust was established, which allowed for the exploration of more controversial issues reflected in the second brief. The topics covered in this brief included cultural differences in the following: the role of women in society; dating, and sexual activity; and sexual identity, same-sex marriage, and legal status of transgender individuals.

Cross-cultural experience

The cross-cultural experience consisted of a visit to the cultural consultant's familial home and business. The experience delved deeper into two aspects: an older generation's perspective and an immigrant's endeavor. Informal personal interviews revealed a reoccurring theme- *filial piety*. A common household topic in Asian cultures, filial piety, or *xiào,* is about the virtue of respect, duty, obedience, and care to one's parents, elders, and ancestors. During the cross-cultural experience, the immigrant couple described the burden of clashing cultures in their perspective when it came to a child's responsibility of piety versus the Western culture of independence. To uphold the duty and tradition of a filial pious child, one would need to let go of individual wants and desires for the good of the family. For this family, activities that were not conducive to the enhancement of education or well-being were deemed as unnecessary. The time spent doing those activities were better allocated as time helping, learning, or running the family business. This sacrifice was viewed as an expectation. It was expected to put the family's needs above an individual's needs without needing to be asked.

Mini-workshop

Designing effective instructional content for learners from diverse global locations requires faculty and staff to establish cultural competencies. For this to happen, colleges and universities must promote and support the educational endeavors for intercultural awareness. The final step of this study was the development of an online mini-workshop, using the tools of the Sakai learning management system (LMS). The instructional content of the workshop was developed using the data collected through interviews with the cultural consultant as well as the cross-experience. Supplemental learning materials, such as podcasts and videos relevant to Taiwanese and mainland Chinese culture, were integrated into the mini-workshop. Learning

activities to support the development of cultural competencies were designed and paired with the instructional media.

The main activity in the workshop utilized the web conferencing tool of the LMS to establish relationships with Taiwanese students enrolled in academic programs in the United States one semester before arrival. Relevant information from the cultural briefs in this study were provided in the LMS to prepare the instructor to establish a connection with the student. Establishing relationships between faculty and in-coming international students could enhance a sense of relatedness with the academic program before arrival.

Implications for future use

Multicultural awareness is essential for designing effective learning experiences for diverse learners; an availability and enhancement of instructor training opportunities is necessary to address the academic needs of international students. Because cultural groups differ in their perceptions, behaviors, communication, or relationships, studies such as this provide transferability across different contexts and cultures. Though this study concentrated on Chinese and Taiwanese culture, this project can be customized and modified to examine other cultures as well.

Within higher education, cross cultural competencies can be developed by providing cultural understanding to both students and faculty. Training courses specifically developed with international students in mind can assist in avoiding interactions that distinct cultures others may find confusing. These training courses could provide the beginnings of a customizable toolbox that could be developed within the LMS for a bigger goal: creating appropriate intercultural understanding throughout the college or university at the organizational level (Izzard & Ross, 2015).

Within the target culture, providing peer-to-peer mentoring would help students smoothly transition into their new lives. Volunteers from the target culture can serve as mentors for new students. Furthermore, providing opportunities to establish pre-arrival relationships would develop a strong mentorship bond for both students and faculty. It would also alleviate some the anxiety of uncertainty international students may have when arriving into a new learning environment.

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Phillip Ward is an instructional designer and graduate assistant at the Innovation in Learning Center at the University of South Alabama (USA). He has taught English at the National Technical University of Oil and Gas in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine as part of his service with

Peace Corps. His scholarly interests are in instructional design for international students and multicultural issues in higher education. He is currently earning a PhD in Instructional Design and Development (IDD) at USA. He also holds an BA in International Studies and an MS in IDD from USA, as well as an MBA from the University of Mobile.

Michelle Loo is an instructional designer and graduate assistant at the Innovation in Learning Center at the University of South Alabama (USA). She taught English in Ningbo, China with the international school *English First*. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Instructional Design and Development (IDD) at the University of South Alabama. Ms. Loo holds a BA in Psychology, a BS in Marketing, and an MS in IDD from USA. Her research interests are in active learning, aesthetic course design, and development of instructional content for students of Asian origin.